

eGUIDE//

Government & Politics

Unit A2 2 Option A: Political Power

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Political Power

Introduction

This guide is intended to support you in your study of Unit A22 Option A: Political Power and has two parts; Section A: The Factors involved in the exercise of political power and Section B: Theories of Political Power.

Section A will focus on the factors involved in the exercise of political power. In seeking to further develop your knowledge and understanding of concepts such as power, authority and democracy this guide will provide you with information about the factors affecting the legitimacy of a state leading either to its survival or collapse. This guide will also provide relevant case studies of a range of political systems in which power has been maintained using either coercive or legitimate methods.

Section B of this guide will focus on the major theories that seek to explain the nature and distribution of political power. This section will explain how pluralism, Marxism, elite theory and feminism address the issues of the origin, nature and distribution of power and evaluate the criticisms made of each theory.

Both sections will enrich your knowledge and understanding of the learning outcomes for this unit with the aid of hyperlinks to further reading, documentaries and news footage.



Political Power


Section A:

Factors involved in the exercise of power

What is Power?


In its simplest terms, Power is the ability to influence outcomes in your favour. We see it all the time in families, social settings and the workplace. In the political context it involves governments, individuals and states being able to achieve their aims and objectives. So it might be a government seeking to deliver on a particular policy. You will have seen this during your studies for AS1: The Government and Politics of Northern Ireland when looking at The Northern Ireland Executive's priorities in its Programme for Government. It might even be an individual seeking to steer decisions their way; you will have considered this when studying the British Prime Minister. Or it may be a state seeking to influence the behaviour of other states; you will have explored this when studying the foreign policy of the United States' government. So when you use this guide it is important to bear these different variations of power in mind.

Power cannot be discussed without also considering concepts such as authority, coercion, authoritarianism, legitimacy and state stability.

There will be a number of 'Red Flag'  moments throughout this Eguide when you will be encouraged to think a little deeper about some of the issues discussed.

Authority

We often use the term 'authority' when referring to political leaders. Authority is when the people accept your right to rule; they consent to it. The German philosopher Max Weber felt that there were three types of authority: **Traditional**, **Charismatic** and **Legal Rational**.

 **Red Flag:** Think about how the following characteristics can give a leader authority.

Traditional authority is the right to exercise power based on one's position within society. It reflects a certain deference from the population towards the power holder in response to their status.



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A monarch may exercise power on the basis of their position. In Europe this faded with the onset of democracies and modern societies but it still exists within states that have not experienced this process. In [Saudi Arabia](#), the entire state is governed by the House of Saud Royal Family. Many of the warring factions in Afghanistan and Libya are 'tribal leaders'.

This can also be applied to religious leaders when they assume a status within a society. In Iran, a state with an elected President, much of the political power rests with the Ayatollahs. Westerners find this strange but less than 100 years ago the Papacy wielded huge political influence in Europe as 'God's representative on earth.' Much of this power was indirect and subtle, however, it is widely recognised that divorce was delayed in pre 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland because of the political sway of the Church.

Charismatic authority is when an individual exercises power through the sheer force of their personality. This can be an asset to being elected in a democracy. In Britain, there was a marked contrast in the public's relationship with Tony Blair and Gordon Brown despite the fact that they followed broadly similar policies. [Barack Obama's](#) 'Yes we can' message was very powerful and forged a connection with voters.

Even dictators can have charisma. Hitler was a [powerful public speaker](#) whereas Mussolini created the image of a decisive 'man of action'. In some dictatorships a 'cult of personality' ensues with a heavily propagandised message to make the people more willing to obey, as [in North Korea](#).



Legal authority is when someone exercises power through a legal right given to them. This does not have to be enshrined in law. In most democracies the Legal Rational authority comes from the ballot box. A leader has received a mandate from the people, so it is assumed that they have given their [consent to be governed](#). This is one of the reasons why governments take legislative defeats so badly; their authority and therefore their legitimate right to govern is questioned as a result of this defeat.

Steven Lukes, a political and social theorist, believed, like many Marxists, that authority can be manufactured and that those in power could socialise the working classes into accepting their lot in life thus allowing the ruling class to retain their power. He [identified three 'faces' of power](#); 1 – Decision making; 2 – Non-decision making and 3 – Shaping Desires. Lukes believed that Weber's definition only dealt with the first of these and his three 'faces' of power were an attempt to broaden the discussion about how power is exercised.



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Red Flag

- What do we mean when we say that someone has authority?
- What type of authority might you associate with
 - A dictatorship
 - A democracy
 - A Third World Country
- Explain in your own words the 3 types of authority – use 2 NEW examples for each.

Coercion

When we examine coercion we are concerned with a number of aspects:

- What is Coercion?
- The various forms of Coercion
- Evaluating the effectiveness of Coercion

What is Coercion?

When political movements or leaders do not have authority they may resort to Coercion. To coerce someone is to force them to do something. They will obey the person who has the power because they wish to avoid the consequences of not doing so. It is different to Authority because people **comply** rather than **consent**.

Red Flag – Think about how states pressurise others through the use of these methods.

The various forms of coercion:

Physical force

Physical force can be used to influence an outcome. **War** is perhaps the ultimate example of this type of coercion. Sometimes the threat of force can be enough. The Soviet Union only had to use major force twice in its forty year control over Eastern Europe, in Hungary in 1956 and Prague in 1968. Military exercises on the border were enough to get the Polish government to change policy in 1981.





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It can be used within states – e.g. Israel uses **coercive force** against the Palestinians. Whether this is effective is questionable. It could be argued that it is actually counterproductive.

Although it is a subjective term ‘Terrorism’ is a form of physical coercion as it seeks to influence outcomes. Even the most extreme actions such as the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers or the seemingly irrational destruction by **ISIS** have political motivations.

Torture

This is a variation on physical force as its aim is to instil fear among the general population so that they will comply with the government. In Chile during the 1970’s, Pinochet used to torture the families of opponents to silence potential opposition. The United States has used ‘waterboarding’ to obtain information from ‘enemy combatants’ at Guantanamo Bay as part of its ‘War on Terror’ and moved suspects to sites where there are less legal restraints on torture, a process known as **rendition**. Torture is forbidden under the Geneva Convention but many states and movements continue to use it.

Police State

This is when the apparatus of state force, such as the police, the security services and the judiciary are used in a political fashion to reinforce the regime. It often involves spying on one’s own citizens, intrusion into people’s private lives and networks of informers. The former East Germany (DDR) would be an example of this. It is thought that up to 10% of the entire population were informants for the **Stasi secret police**.

Deprivation of liberty

This is when someone is physically removed from an area where they can upset the system. Napoleon Bonaparte was exiled (twice) by Britain during the revolutionary wars. The Dalai Lama has been kept out of Tibet for over 30 years. He wants an independent Tibet but it is controlled by the Chinese.

Social coercion

This is when pressure is put on citizens to conform and behave in a certain way. Difference is ‘frowned upon’ and can lead to social exclusion. In Germany in the 1930s, women were expected to conform in terms of **looks and behaviour**. Bizarrely, North Korea has a government approved list of **haircuts**. Religious movements have also sought to use the notion of ‘sin’ to enforce behaviours.

Economic coercion

This is a more subtle form of coercion. It is when a country or a group uses its economic resources to gain leverage over a situation. Some parts of Europe depend upon Russian gas for their domestic and **industrial energy needs**. Russia has used this fact to assert its wishes in **foreign policy**.



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Authoritarianism

An authoritarian government is one which uses its control over the apparatus of the state to consolidate its own power, to limit opposition to its rule and enforce its ideology. This involves many elements that might be described as coercive. An authoritarian government does not have to be a dictatorship. Indeed there are many countries that have elected governments yet practice authoritarian methods through control of the legal system, the police, the army, and the media. Indeed, it could be argued that what makes them different is that they lack the 'liberal' characteristics of a liberal democracy.

It is very difficult for opposition groups to operate in an atmosphere of authoritarianism. Many opponents of Vladimir Putin in Russia have found themselves being charged with criminal offences such as fraud. Putin's critics would argue that such intimidation is a direct consequence of their opposition to his rule.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban in Hungary has talked about his desire to make Hungary an '[illiberal state](#)' and the ruling Law and Justice party in Poland has recently passed legislation that, according to critics, is [curtailing press freedom](#).

Once again, the level of authoritarianism has to be seen in the context of a sliding scale. Modern day Russia has authoritarian traits but it is still far removed from the level of state control that existed in the [Soviet Union and communist Eastern Europe](#).

Case study of Russia

BBC article [Vladimir Putin: The rebuilding of 'Soviet' Russia](#)

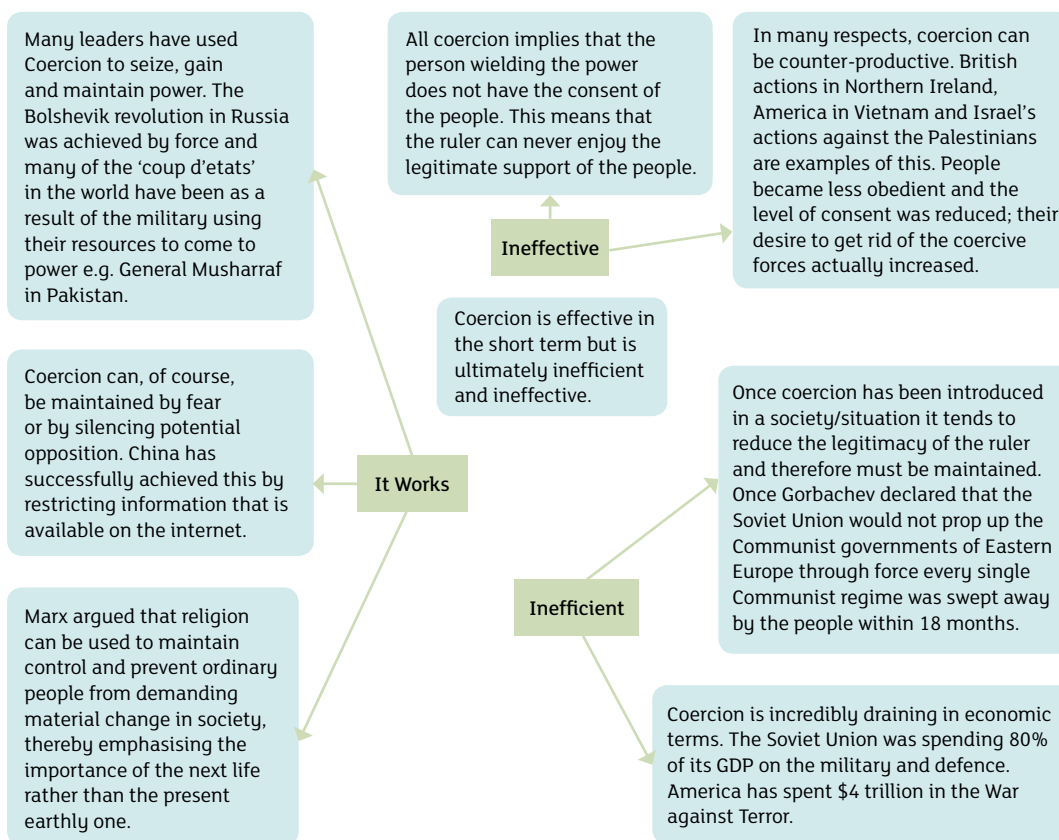
Guardian article [15 years of Vladimir Putin: 15 ways he has changed Russia and the world](#)

Daily Telegraph article and video [After the assassination of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, can Russia still claim to be a democracy?](#)



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An argument can be made that whilst coercion can be effective in the short term, it has its limitations as a solid basis for exercising power. Abraham Lincoln claimed that while ‘force is all conquering, its victories are short-lived’.



Many coercive regimes, such as the Soviet Union and Communist states of Eastern Europe have ended in failure. If they are to endure they need to find other factors upon which they can build a solid foundation for power. This is what Rousseau was referring to when he asserted that ‘the strongest is never strong enough to be master all the time, unless he transforms force into right and obedience into duty.’ This is referred to as **legitimacy**.

Research

You may wish to look at the following coercive regimes:

Idi Amin’s Uganda – in particular how his treatment of the Bangladeshi Community was counter-productive;

China – in particular its silencing of anti-government protest; and

North Korea – in particular its almost religious-like conformity.



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Discussion – Coercion is an effective means of exercising power in the short term

The acquisition of power through physical force is probably the oldest method of political strategy in human history. From Emperor Hannibal to Attila the Hun in ancient history, to the modern era of Idi Amin and General Musharaf, physical force coercion has been an immediate way to gain control over a state or society. Controlling the means of force represents a power that many in society will find impossible to challenge, even if they wished to do so.

There are states where the maintenance of power has been based almost wholly on repressive means. A classic example of this would be in the example of the Soviet Union. The levels of coercion were all encompassing and the population did not challenge the regime because they did not have the means to do so. In modern China all protest is suppressed and communication channels are closed. Heavy jail terms, torture and even public execution are the sanctions that the public fear, leading them to comply with a system that many would oppose given the opportunity.

These totalitarian, monolithic state structures, where every aspect of life is co-ordinated give the impression of effectiveness because the power holder appears to be in complete control. However, this is often a superficial impression. It was often said of Mussolini that he 'made the trains run on time.' Actually, he didn't. Fascist Italy was often a mixture of theatrics and policy failure. Historians such as Kershaw, have shown that beneath the surface, the Nazi regime in Germany was an inefficient morass of competing groups, never attaining the heights described in the public propaganda. Or if one looks to Idi Amin's Uganda, the country was arguably destroyed by his megalomania and the inability of anyone to challenge his often ludicrous policies.

Of course the underlying reason that coercion is used is rooted in the power holder's lack of legitimacy. In many cases they do not have the consent of the people to assume power in the first place and therefore lack any vestige of true authority. Where authority is non-existent then coercion becomes the methodology of retaining power. Mugabe's Zimbabwe illustrates how a leader who has lost their authority can lapse into coercion in a desperate bid to stay in charge. In his case he once had legal rational authority, conferred on him by the people of Zimbabwe through the ballot box. However, when it looked as if he would be denied this, he resorted to election rigging, terror and the coercion of opposition groups.



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Legitimacy

Legitimacy is when the citizens of a state have faith in their political system and accept its prevailing values and political structures. In the West we tend to see liberal democracy as the most legitimate form of government. Such democracies include a range of features that may bring about more faith in the system.

Red Flag – As we discuss the various features, think about how they might increase people's faith in their system.

Factors that Create legitimacy?

A **written constitution** gives people faith in their system and allows the system a high degree of political credit. You will have noticed this in your Comparative module. Britain does not have a single written Constitution; much of what the government can and cannot do derives from statute law. The problem with this approach is that governments can easily change these laws.

A **legal system that is both independent and impartial** can greatly increase the legitimacy of a system as it allows the people to challenge the government's actions e.g. judicial review. A **free press** is also viewed as important as it allows for open criticism of the government. In the USA the Constitution guarantees freedom of the press.



A wide choice of **Political Parties** is essential in any democracy. A range of views can be catered for and find expression within the political system, thus allowing people to feel that they have a political outlet for their views and aspirations. For example, there are many different parties in the Italian parliament ranging from former Communists to Northern Separatists (Lega Nord).

However, do we really have a wide choice in the West? Think about how few policy differences exist between the Democrat and the Republican parties in the USA.

Campaigning groups should exist that allow for issues to be raised signalling discontent. Almost two million people marched in protest against [the war in Iraq](#). There are many issues which are not in the manifestos of parties, so the ability to make one's voice heard on an issue is important. Of course in many countries, such as China, where political protest is severely restricted, the legitimacy of the state is questionable.





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Elections are at the heart of any democracy but they must be free, fair and regular. In Britain, we accept the outcome of these elections and accept the right of the elected government to introduce its policies. In October 2002 all 11,445,638 of Iraq's eligible voters cast their vote in favour of Saddam Hussein. This remarkable result was achieved through having the name and address of each voter on the ballot paper. Thus, his victory was not legitimate. Despite widespread unpopularity Robert Mugabe's Zanu PF party managed to win the last election in Zimbabwe by a landslide. However, there were [many irregularities](#).

Many people have a greater loyalty and respect for a system that respects human rights. Most European countries are signatories of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR), yet not all of them are enshrined in law. There are countless examples of rights abuses in countries throughout the world.

Yet, it is possible to not have these democratic features and still be viewed as legitimate by the people. In this way, legitimacy is very much in the eye of the beholder.



Sometimes a leader may be so charismatic that the people are convinced of the superiority of their judgement. Though this impression may be created through propaganda, it can still occur. [Benito Mussolini](#) was a Fascist dictator but managed to rule Italy for 21 years. People admired his larger than life style and reputation as a man of action with dramatic outbursts such as, 'If I advance; follow me! if I retreat; kill me! if I die; avenge me!' and 'Better to live a day as a lion than 100 years as a sheep.' A modern example would be the dynamic ruler of Venezuela, the late Hugo Chavez. He positioned himself as a champion of the poor, goaded America and even hosted his own phone-in show where people could address their problems directly to El Presidente. To view the dynamic Chavez in action [click here](#).

A sense of patriotism and national belonging can help to legitimatise a state. If a state is made up of a predominantly single ethnic/national group then people will feel that it is 'their' country and 'their' government. If we look at Croatia, there are many problems within the country, yet the Croatian people are very proud of their country. They see its establishment as a historical right. They had wanted a mainly Catholic, Croatian based state for centuries. Similarly, though many outsiders were aghast at the behaviour of Serbia in the 1990s, support within the state was overwhelming.

In a related phenomenon, if a state is under threat from an outside enemy, then it can create a bond between the people and the government. It can lead to increased patriotism and a sense of 'my country, right or wrong'. For decades, the Cuban regime turned the threat that it felt from America into a source of support. Many political posters [illustrate this](#).



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Religion can also be used as a legitimising force to gain the support of the people. For centuries, Kings sought the blessing of Popes and patriarchs to legitimise their rule. In Iran there is widespread support for the religious character of the government, and in areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan there is widespread support for the **Taliban**. Even in America there is an organised 'Religious Right' who wish to see a Christian oriented government.

However, the most prominent reason for supporting a system is the delivery of economic prosperity. Those states that offer a high degree of affluence will get major political credit from their citizens. They will be prepared to overlook the lack of democratic features in order not to jeopardise this prosperity. Despite being one of the world's most repressive regimes in the world China has succeeded in eliminating its **urban poverty**. In Hong Kong in the 1990s people were actually angered by pro-democracy student protests as they thought it might jeopardise a system that was generating wealth. When economic prosperity is delivered the citizens are more prepared to overlook the less appealing aspects of the state. Would Hitler have got away with the violent nature of his regime, had it not been for the apparent improvements in the **German economy**?

So there are many factors that can add to the legitimacy of a state. The more sources that a state can call upon, the more legitimacy it will have. Robert A. Dahl explains legitimacy using the metaphor of a reservoir: as long as it stays at a certain level, stability is maintained, if it falls below this level, the state may struggle to survive, leading to State Collapse.

An interesting task might be to look at Northern Ireland in the late 1960s. How many of the features of legitimacy mentioned did it have?



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Exam Help

Question one in the Power examination will ask you to 'explain' a term. Sometimes students will know a term but struggle to select the right things to put in an explanation. It may be helpful to give yourself a checklist to trigger ideas.

Your checklist might be:

- What is it?
- How does it work / How is it implemented
- A reference to the source
- Its political significance
- An example
- Are there variations or interesting angles on this term?

State Collapse

What do we mean by State Collapse?

Sometimes a state will come under such immense pressure that its institutions of government will not be able to survive the crisis, leading to collapse and an upheaval in the system of governance. There are a number of factors that can bring such pressure. Whenever a state faces such turmoil, it is referred to as instability. When these 'waves of crisis' occur it tends to be those states that have a greater degree of legitimacy that are best positioned to survive the storm. Others descend into revolution or civil war.

Red Flag: Think about how these factors may lead to a challenge to the state

Factors that can lead to state collapse:

War and violence

War and violence can be particularly destabilising. Once it occurs it is very difficult to contain. Violence can escalate and countries can be dragged into a wider conflict – look how the murder of the Archduke in Sarajevo in 1914 had evolved within a month into a **general European war**. Some will use the chaotic nature of war for their own ends. The Russian revolutionary Trotsky declared war to be 'the midwife of revolution' – indeed, in the Russian case most of the destabilising factors that led to the revolution were linked to the First World War.



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Even in Ireland, the war provided cover for potential rebellion – ‘England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity’. When a state of war occurs, the normal rule of law deteriorates. One could argue that the Holocaust could not have happened without the chaos and exceptional circumstances caused by the Second World War.

Politically motivated violence (terrorism) is also destabilising, deliberately so in some cases. Republican political violence in Ireland has always been aimed at making the country ungovernable. The spectre of political violence stalked the [Weimar Republic](#) and only further weakened its shaky foundations.

Humboldt asserted ‘La revolucion se devore ses enfants’ (revolution consumes its children) – once violence has been introduced into a society it is very difficult to remove it as it becomes (for some) a legitimate political tool. Many violent revolutions have led to the victors using the same violence on each other due to political disagreements.

Russian Revolution 1917 – [Civil War](#) – 1919–20

French Revolution 1789 – [the Jacobin terror](#) – 1791–94

Irish Rebellion 1919–21 – Civil War – 1921–22

Countless third world countries have descended into internal conflict after overthrowing imperial powers and the overthrow of Colonel Gaddafi has been followed by a civil war [in Libya](#).





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Poverty

Changes in economic circumstances can be extremely destabilising within a society. In times of economic chaos people will often turn to extremes. In the 1932 German federal elections more than 50% of the population voted for either the Nazis or the Communists – two parties that were revolutionary and anti – democratic. In the 1930s, 25 different political systems collapsed to be replaced with extremists from the left and right. In 2014 and 2015, in the wake of ongoing financial hardship, many of the ‘establishment’ political parties **lost support across Europe**, with Syriza being elected in Greece and the rise of **Podemos in Spain**.

Dire poverty can often be the spur to action. There is a case to be made that the wave of protests known as the Arab Spring were as much to do with the frustration brought about by living in a society where poverty was widespread rather than the lack of democratic rights. These countries also had a concentration of wealth among the political elite and corrupt practices were rife.

Discussion on how declining economic standards can lead to increasing instability

Economic prosperity has long been held to be one of the cornerstones of stability for any society. History is littered with cases of seemingly powerful regimes that have floundered and collapsed due to their inability to attain, and, more importantly, maintain levels of affluence within the state.

The 1929 Wall St Crash heralded the collapse of the global economy in the 1930s. It is no coincidence that over 25 systems of government collapsed in its wake. Notable among these was Weimar Germany; seemingly a model democracy with the most educated population in Europe. Within a year of the crash more than half of that population had turned to either the Nazi or the Communist parties that were dedicated to destroying that democracy and revolutionising the State. Similarly it was the loss of affluence brought about by the collapse of the silk market that brought an aggressive military regime to power in Japan. Its main objective was to create an empire in Asia that would keep the Japanese state furnished with natural resources. In times of crisis, people often go to extremes and in the thirties it was financial catastrophe that fed the ideological extremes of left and right.



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The states of Western Europe enjoy the highest level of affluence in the world and appear to be very stable. Yet even these states have bouts of instability when faced with difficulty. At the height of Thatcher's cuts in the summer of 1981 there were riots in fourteen British cities. French farmers have regularly protested at declining standards of living in the agricultural sector. Even Iceland, long seen as an exemplar of the success of free market investment banking has been brought to its knees by the current credit crunch. The Icelandic state is collapsing amid riots, despair among its citizens and waves of popular protest.

Some states have based their entire stability around prosperity. Oil rich states like Bahrain have very low standards of democratic legitimacy yet the population do not engage in conflict as there is a high and widespread level of affluence. Give the choice between democracy and prosperity, the citizens of Hong Kong were consistently in favour of the latter.

However, it may be that this is a contributory rather than a defining factor of instability in these states. No continent is more plagued with civil war than Africa. Yet one could argue that it is the ethnic and tribal divisions in these states (a hangover from colonial borders) rather than the poverty itself that causes instability. This is not to say that affluence is unimportant but that the instability is due to the various ethnic groups competing for resources. So, it is not how rich or poor a country is but how available wealth is shared that matters.

Furthermore, countries that have experienced civil war will tend to have a culture of violence as their political methodology. As Humboldt said 'revolution consumes its children' and it is the quest for power and competing ideology that often fuels third world instability.

There are also societies that have legitimacy among the people in spite of their grinding poverty. Cuba has been subjected to American sanctions for over 50 years and despite the destitution, Castro's regime remains popular. He may use a higher degree of coercion than many liberal democracies but essentially the regime is stable through a mixture of popular anti American defiance and national pride.

So whilst there is a point to be made regarding the relationship between affluence and stability, and it remains a key factor of legitimacy for any regime, it would be inaccurate to see it as the only guarantor of a stable society.



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Ethnic Conflict

From 1919-1990 Yugoslavia was a country made up of diverse people. It contained Croats (Catholic), Bosnians (Muslims), Serbs (Orthodox), Slovenes, Macedonians, Albanians and Montenegrins. The Serbs had always dominated the country but it had been relatively stable. After the collapse of Communism, Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia, **deliberately inflamed ethnic tensions** and used the police politically in an attempt to gain power. Yugoslavia, as a result, endured four years of civil war and a complete state breakdown.

Africa tends to provide a lot of conflict as many of the states are artificial constructs based on borders drawn up by the colonial powers. They often contain groups that have tribal loyalty rather than loyalty to the state. The Rwandan genocide took place during April to July of 1994 and it is estimated that a million members of the Tutsi minority were killed by members of the Hutu majority.

Dictatorships have often 'kept the lid' on ethnic tensions. However, when they are toppled sectarianism and tribalism can emerge as it has done in Libya and Iraq. Click here for a further examination of the [Arab Spring](#).

Even seemingly stable countries can have deep tensions caused by 'national difference'. Political Nationalism is essentially destabilising as it suggests that the current state needs to be altered. If Scotland had voted 'yes' in the independence referendum the 'United Kingdom' as an entity would have been open to question.

Research

You may wish to look at the following 'nationalisms' and examine how they are causing problems for their respective states.

- The Basques and Catalans in Spain
- The Francophones and Anglophones in Canada
- The Walloons and the Flemish in Belgium



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Geopolitical Shifts

A Geopolitical shift is a term used to describe any phenomenon that cuts across borders bringing instability along with it.

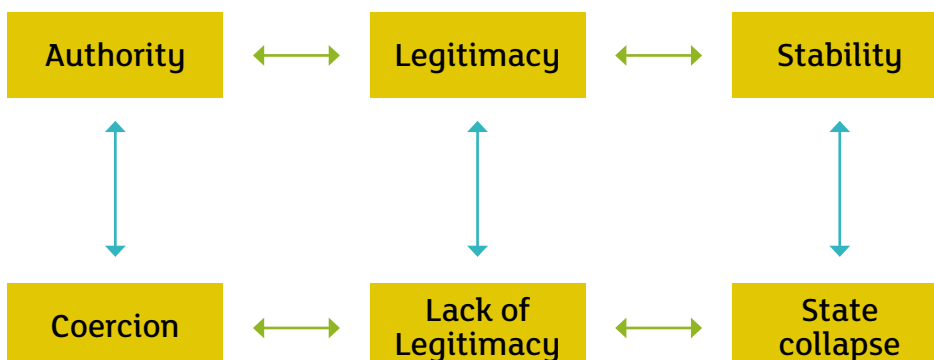
Communism in 1989-90 was toppled by populations engaging in 'People Power', as were the regimes of the Arab Spring. It created a momentum that had a domino effect.

Geopolitical shifts can be the result of a natural phenomenon such as the Asian Tsunami or disease such as the Spanish Flu in 1918 which caused instability in post-war Germany. The UN speculated that the strain and panic of Ebola could lead to failed states in West Africa.

Geopolitical shifts can occur because of reasons beyond state control such as social media, which prompted the Arab Spring. Quite often, it can be ideas and ideology that bring instability. The spread of Christianity was a key factor in destabilising the Roman Empire. Democracy and Communism eventually toppled the monarchies and autocracies of Europe. Many in the West fear that militant Islam will sweep away the existing models of nation states. Think about the current ISIS movement. It does not recognise modern borders or states, only the territory of the Levant.

Making Connections

We have now looked at a number of aspects involved in the exercise of power. You may have already noticed a linkage between them. If we think in terms of scale then it might be possible to argue that a high level of legitimacy coincides with public recognition of government authority and subsequently, state stability. In contrast, states with low levels of legitimacy are open to challenge by the people, are more reliant on coercion and face the possibility of state collapse whenever they reach a crisis point.





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The table below illustrates this by looking at two very different situations.

	Levels of Legitimacy based on sources	Levels of Authority / Coercion	Stability / Collapse
Northern Ireland, 1968-72	Low legitimacy, rejection by the Nationalist community.	Descent into violence, deployment of the army to control the situation. Low level of authority.	State crisis, political violence and the suspension of Stormont.
Modern Germany	High levels of democratic legitimacy and economic prosperity.	High levels of authority. Lack of coercion.	An extremely stable state.
Try inserting another example and see if the pattern continues			

Try a few examples for yourself. Northern Ireland in 2016? This example will show that a state can increase its levels of legitimacy and climb the scale. In contrast, Robert Mugabe's legitimacy in Zimbabwe has declined since he first came to power, resulting in the greater use of coercion and leaving a question mark over the stability of the state.





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Section B: Theories of Power

This section of your course looks at where power lies and examines the theories that seek to explain this.

You will need to be able to explain and evaluate these theories, citing examples and key writers. It is also important to be able to develop a critique of each theory.

These are four main theories:

- Pluralism
- Elite theory
- Marxism
- Feminism

Pluralism

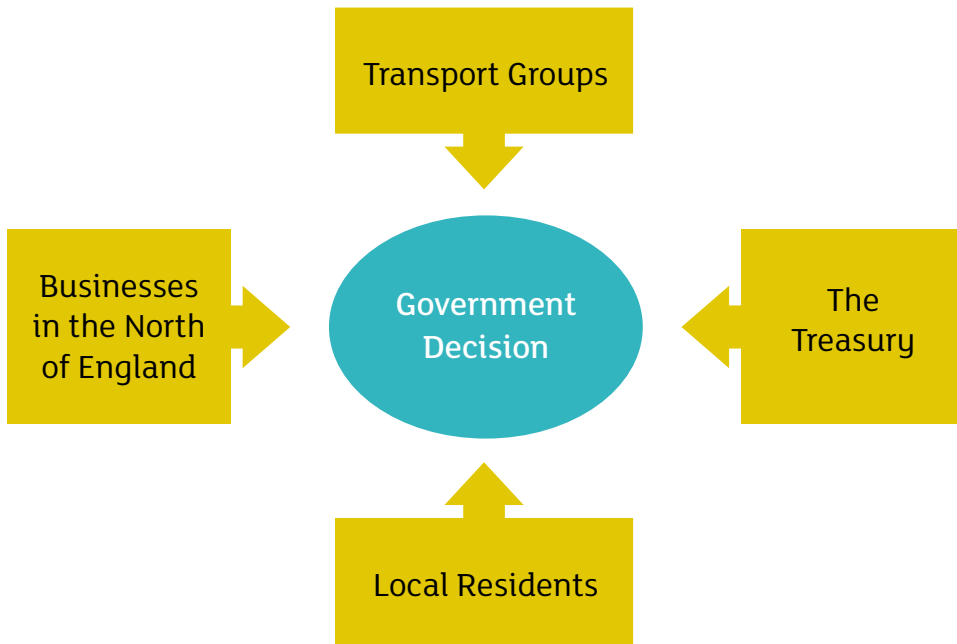
Pluralism is based upon the principles of representative liberal democracy, whereby the ultimate power rests with the people. Pluralists believe that in liberal democracies such as the UK or the USA, power is widely dispersed and there is wide access to the political system with open competition for power. The state takes into account the needs and wishes of all sections of society and acts accordingly. These wishes are primarily expressed through the democratic election process. The government is given a mandate to implement the policies that have the widest level of popular support.

There are examples in history which have seen voters send a clear message to deliver a specific policy. In 1945, Labour won by a landslide on the basis of their election promise to implement the Beveridge report in full. In 2004 in Spain, the issue of Spanish troops in Iraq became the main focus of the general election after the [terrorist bombing in Madrid](#).

The idea that democracies allow the people to remove their leaders is central to the pluralist theory. This is based on Locke's Social Contract. The people give their consent to be governed but are able to withdraw that consent if they are dissatisfied, as was the case with the removal of the Labour government in 2010. However, the elected government runs the state on behalf of all society and not just its voters. When taking decisions it considers the opinions of various interest groups within society and seeks to act as an 'honest broker' between them. Consider the decision by the British Government to build the [high speed HS2 rail line](#). A number of groups might have an interest in this, including government departments.

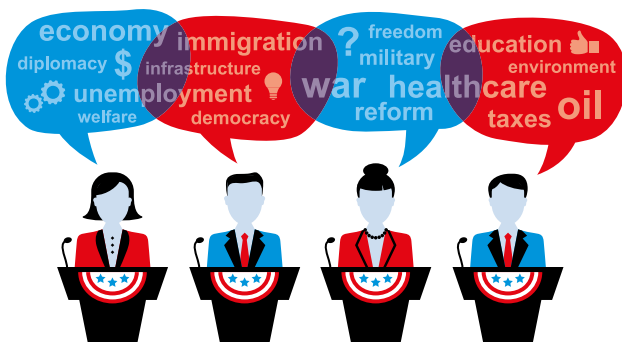


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So when making decision, these various groups will have been taken into consideration and even consulted. It is also very common for government departments to carry out consultation with interest groups with an expertise in a particular area. 'Insider Groups' such as Friends of the Earth may be consulted regarding environmental policy whilst the BMA may have a lot of influence on public health strategy.

Consultation also takes place during the legislative process. In 2016 Stephen Farry, Northern Ireland's Minister for Employment and Learning discarded a section from his Employment Bill that dealt with zero hours contracts after a dialogue with local businesses. Of course this raises the issue of how democratic the lobbying process is but this shall be dealt with when examining Elite Theory.





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Examine some of the decisions taken by the Government in recent years such as:

- the 'Living Wage'
- the smoking ban in public places
- the decision to allow 'fracking'

Try to construct a spider diagram of the different groups in society that may have an interest in the outcome of these decisions.

It is not just the electoral process that provides the basis for pluralism. In the earlier consideration of Legitimacy a number of features were discussed such as regular and fair elections, a wide choice of political parties, the existence of pressure groups, a free press and a legal apparatus that allows the government to be challenged through the courts. All of these liberal democratic features allow for interaction between the state and the governed.



Several political scientists and sociologists have carried out studies to try to quantify how pluralism affects the outcomes of the decision making process. Dahl studied a small town in America, examining key political decisions. He found that a wide range of interests were represented in the decision making process. The outcomes were often the results of compromises between groups. Hewitt carried out a study of British government decisions over a twenty year period and arrived at the view that many sections of society were represented in these decisions and there was no single dominant grouping. Grant and Marsh examined one particular group, the Confederation of British Industry which represents business interests and found that it was not dominant in government decision making.

A variation on this form of Classical Pluralism is 'Elite Pluralism'. This recognises that there are many different groups competing to secure their interests but that some will always be more influential than others. So, wealth producers may have greater influence on the government than charity groups, even though they both have a degree of access.

A key way in which interest groups influence the work of both the executive branch and Congress is through the formation of so-called 'Iron Triangles'.



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This is when we take the three key players in a policy area and see how they interact. So for example with reference to the energy sector:

- A Government Agency such as the Department of Energy
- The 'Fossil Fuel' lobby representing the major oils and gas companies
- The respective House and Senate Committees such as the House Energy and Commerce Committee

The Agency will work closely with groups who represent the economic interests of the energy sector, the 'fossil fuels' lobby. The interest group will seek to make their needs known and work to persuade the relevant Congressional committees to meet these needs.

Criticisms of Pluralism

One of the key things that you will have to do is to be able to develop a critique of each theory. You can use the other theories to help criticise but also point out other flaws which might be made of each theory.

Marxists would attack the notion that the state in liberal democracies tends to act in the interests of all members of society. Since the state supports the capitalist system it will ultimately benefit the wealthy within society.

Feminists would refer to the fact that they make up approximately half of the population yet men still dominate the main positions of power in terms of politics and the economy. Governments have a fundamental misunderstanding of women's issues and have failed to pursue female friendly policies.

Those that believe in the elite theory would argue that democracies are a sham in that select groups of people dominate within them. The public may select the government but the political parties that they have to choose from are essentially organised elites. Look at how many members of recent British cabinets have followed the [Oxbridge – PPE – Special Adviser route on their way to power](#).

Then there is the nature of democracy itself. Many societies may display the features of democracy but how genuine are these Western democracies? The first past the post system in Britain creates exaggerated majorities. The American system is dominated by two political parties with broadly similar policies. In Italy, all magistrates have to belong to a political party, thus wrecking any semblance of impartiality. Even pressure groups are distinguished between those that enjoy 'insider' status and those that do not. Remember that Hailsham described Britain as 'an elective dictatorship' and over 30% of the people of Britain did not participate in each [General Election of the 21st Century](#).



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Pluralism can even be institutionalised through 'Social Partnership', whereby the government and interest groups officially negotiate broad policy strategies. Such a system is used in Scandinavia and the [Republic of Ireland](#).

Elite Theory

In contrast to Pluralism, elite theory stresses that power is concentrated among small groups in society. Supporters of this theory believe that elite rule is inevitable and that whilst the characteristics may vary, every society will have an elite. Furthermore, the presence of an elite in society is preferable. These elites will not rule in the interests of all sections of society and will try to create the illusion of popular control through the electoral system. However, the true picture is that all such systems are oligarchies. Even those societies that have tried to systematically engineer equality failed to do so. The post war regimes of Eastern Europe simply paved the way for new elites that formed around the ruling Communist parties. One elite will eventually replace another, in what is termed the 'circulation of elites'.

Two theorists associated with elitism are Mosca and Pareto. Pareto felt that elites were formed because of the outstanding characteristics displayed by individuals. This might be due to physical force and bravery (he referred to those who possessed these traits as Lions), or ingenuity and cunning (Foxes was the name given to those exhibiting these characteristics). Mosca went further and said that it was the shared characteristics of dominant groups that led to the inevitable forming of elites.

Social and Educational Elites

Many commentators used to talk of the 'Establishment' and how it permeated the positions of influence in Britain in the inter-war years. The membership was characterised by an upper middle class background and a public school/Oxbridge education. Its members spoke in Received Pronunciation and were generally members of the Church of England.





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The educational revolution after the Second World War changed this and created more social mobility and a meritocracy. In recent years, however, this has been reversed and again Britain is being dominated by those who have received a private education. Conservative MP Nadine Dorries famously accused David Cameron and Nick Clegg of being 'two arrogant posh boys'. In particular, Eton has alumni that are **spread throughout public life in Britain**. This pattern is not unique to Britain. Ivy League Colleges in America and the 'Rugby Schools' in Dublin both serve as recruiting grounds for the political elite. They not only have a network of contacts but their close interaction brings with it a narrow range of 'establishment values'

Dynastic Elites

This is when the members of the elite have a connection to a **famous political lineage** such as the Kennedys in the USA or the Nehru-Ghandi family that dominated Indian politics since the formation of the state. If Hilary Clinton had succeeded in her bid for the presidency, then by 2020, America would have had only 8 years since 1988 without either a Bush or a Clinton in the White House.

Can you find out about other political dynasties? The Irish Cabinet in the 1980s and 1990s had ministers such as Garret Fitzgerald, Mary O' Rourke and Charles Haughey who all had familial political connections. You may wish to research these. Or look at the connections of those mentioned in the text.

Religious Elites

Rulers have always sought to harness the power of religion in order to confirm their own credentials among their subjects. For centuries the Holy Roman Emperors travelled from Germany to Rome to be crowned by the Pope as a symbol of their divine right to Rule. This in turn gave the Church influence. However, there are some societies where the clerics themselves hold enormous power as an organised group. Iran is an official Islamic Republic. It has an elected President but it is the religious leaders, the Ayatollahs that hold political sway. Religious fundamentalism in politics is very potent because rulers can claim that their decisions have **the backing of the deity**.



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The Military Industrial Complex

This is a term used to describe the overlapping membership and interests between the political establishment, business and the military. This is most clearly seen in the USA but can also be seen to be developing in Israel and the former Apartheid regime in South Africa. In the former communist countries of Eastern Europe there was a clear link between politics and the military.

C. Wright Mills wrote of the 'Power Elite' in 1950s America. His study coincided with greater US military involvement overseas, economic expansion and the increasing power of politicians. The theory states that these three groups have shared interests that may benefit from a perpetual state of conflict as outlined below.

- Politicians have their authority increased and are questioned less if the nation is under threat.
- The Military will be in a highly influential position and will see defence spending greatly increase.
- Increased defence spending stimulates the economy and military action benefits American business which reflects well on the politicians.

How might this work in the case of America's 'War on Terror'?

Military Industrial Complex theorists could point to America's 'war on terror' after 9/11 as evidence of this theory being played out.

Politicians: The authority of the Bush administration increased, foreign policy and the abuse of civil liberties were unquestioned.

Military: was able to justify their role, show how necessary they are and lobby for even more money to be spent on them.

Business: The military need new technology to remain unassailable with the added bonus of a US presence in the Middle East to protect its oil supply.



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Organisational Elites

Michels talked of the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' brought about by organisational elites. By this he meant that if a group has the organisational resources behind it then it can mobilise these to achieve a desirable outcome. Being at the head of an enormous federal bureaucracy that was in charge of a range of government programmes was one of the factors in the expansion of US Presidential power in the 1930s.

Political parties can be seen as organisational elites. They are composed of mobilised activists who seek to obtain power to put their ideas into practice. In this respect, political parties can be seen, not as a reflection of the wishes of the people, but rather offer the people a set of organised political groupings from which to choose from. If this is the case then it weakens the idyllic picture of democracy that many commentators seek to portray.

Trade Unions are another example of an organisational elite. Before the Trade Union Act of 2016, trade unions in Britain could claim to represent the wishes of all of their members even when many policies and ballots for strike action were voted for on the basis of a low turnout of members. Industrial action can now only be allowed to go ahead when there has been a ballot turnout of at least 50%.

Racial Elites

In colonial societies, racial elites were very common with the colony either being ruled by the imperial power itself or by a local proxy group with imperial backing. When these states gained independence the situation became more fluid. However, in some situations power could still be argued **to be exercised on the basis of race**. The most notorious example of this was in Apartheid South Africa, the government of which was based on racial laws introduced by the ruling white minority from 1948 to 1994. Although few states carry out their racial view quite so blatantly, we must remember that in Southern US states, segregation and a level of disenfranchisement was maintained until the late 1960s. The Native American population in the United States and the Aboriginal population in Australia were also excluded from the development of 'Nation States' that were instituted on the territory where they lived.

Criticisms of Elite Theory

Pluralists are critical of the elite theory in that it ignores the social mobility that has taken place in many societies. Most western democracies are meritocracies and access to education has provided greater access to a greater number of roles. Neither Margaret Thatcher, John Major nor Gordon Brown came from an upper class background and Barack Obama's father was a Kenyan immigrant.



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Marxists agree with elite theorists that power is concentrated within society but they differ on the source of that concentration. The Kennedys have a wealth of \$850 billion and the Bush family have a net worth of \$60 million. Marxists assert that all power is rooted in wealth and any advantages that are accrued such as a public school education are the end product of wealth. Marxists also question the inevitability of the emergence of elites as they feel that the capitalist system can be challenged and changed.

Feminists argue that the notion of elites masks the real division of power in society which is based around gender. Where elites do exist these still tend to be male dominated.

Marxism

Marxism is based on the theories of Karl Marx and Friederich Engels who examined the nature of society in the 19th Century. They concentrated on the nature of economic relationships and how these shaped society.

Marxists argue that wealth and resources are the basis of political power. As the ownership of this wealth is concentrated among small groups, then power is concentrated in the same narrow circles. This group is known as the ruling class. Not only do they rule over the masses (the subject class) but they exploit them in order to maintain their position.



The state in capitalist societies is not, as pluralists argue, neutral. Instead it acts in the interests of the ruling class. There are variations on how this power is implemented and maintained.

Miliband argues that the ruling class directly controls the state. If we look at the background of those who hold state power we find that very many of them come from a ruling class background. In Britain this is indicated by a public school education but as previously mentioned, the domination of state power by the people with these social characteristics is equally true of the USA, Ireland and according to Marxists, all other capitalist countries.

However another school of Marxist thought, Structuralism, places the onus on the capitalist structure itself. The ruling class rules indirectly, they do not even have to be members of the institutions of state. Since the state in capitalist societies operates within the capitalist framework it cannot help but act in the interests of the



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ruling class. As long as capitalism remains, so will the power of the ruling class, as its operation favours those with resources. Poulantzas was a major exponent of this theory. He also argued that the benefits that ordinary people have accrued in Western democracies, such as a minimum wage or free education, are mere concessions to divert attention away from the real lack of progress. This helps promote the myth that the state represents everyone.

Structuralists argue that the state will use a mixture of repressive apparatus and ideological apparatus to maintain and promote the system.

The police and the courts have always favoured the protection of property. Education, the media and organised religion all sustain the capitalist system.

Marx had a particular view of organised religion and the role it played in maintaining the status quo. He described it as the 'opiate of the masses'. By encouraging the poor to concentrate on the 'next' life, their attention would be diverted away from the injustice of this one. Additionally if the poor tried to achieve equality by challenging the powerful then that would be sinful and they would have to pay the consequences.

Related to this is Gramsci's theory of 'hegemony' - where the ruling class uses all methods at its disposal to impose its values on the ruled. In other words, everybody accepts and buys into the capitalist framework. Look how many people in the US buy into the notion of the 'American Dream', yet the possibility of fulfilling it is extremely remote. We come to feel that there is no alternative and continue to drive the system through buying consumer goods. Advertising plays a key role in this. [Naomi Klein](#) has written of how the corporations and brands now try to sell us entire lifestyles to get us to consume.

Ask yourself this question? Are there particular brands of clothing that you favour over others? It may be that you prefer the quality or look of these clothes. However, is it possible that you have developed a 'brand loyalty.'



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If the Marxist analysis of power is accurate then we should be able to see decisions and outcomes favouring the wealthier in society.

Governmental Actions that may favour the rich

New Labour was a party dedicated to social equality. In spite of this the gap between rich and poor widened during every year of the Blair premiership. During the Iraq War, the US government awarded a contract of \$16 billion to Haliburton to repair the Iraqi oil fields. This contract was not put out to tender and Dick Cheney, one of the architects of the war had close connections to this company. Some would argue that large companies such as Vodafone are given 'sweetheart' deals by the Government to pay less tax than they actually owe (estimated at £4–£6 Billion). After the economic meltdown of 2008 the Irish government sought to 'bail out' the banking system rather than let banks fail. It was the Irish taxpayer who had to bear the cost.

Internationally

According to Marxists, international trade agreements are rigged in favour of rich countries. **Globalisation** and the free movement of capital has reinforced inequality rather than cured it. Moreover, economics play a major part in international relations. Britain may complain about the behaviour of some authoritarian regimes but at the same time it is quite **prepared to lend support to Saudi Arabia** despite the fact that it has an appalling human rights record, beheading **158 convicted criminals in 2015**. Marxists would assert that this is directly linked to the amount of trade in the arms industry that Britain has with Saudi Arabia. Poor countries that feel they have no choice but to accept loans from the IMF are also encouraged to privatise their health systems and water supplies, virtually taking away their sovereignty of action.

Multinationals

To some Marxists, multinational companies operate on a different set of rules from the ordinary citizen. Their wealth and investment is so coveted by governments that they are allowed to avoid regulation. Companies such as Amazon, Google and Starbucks operate complex tax flows in order to avoid paying **the full rate of tax**. In the third world, many countries are so desperate for any investment, that they will allow the multinationals to bend the rules. Union Carbide was the US chemical company linked to the Bhopal disaster in India and is thought to have received lenient treatment **from the Indian courts**. The phenomenon of sweatshops can only exist with the direct compliance of **the host government**.

One key difference between Marxists and elitists surrounds the inevitability of the distribution of power. As Marxists equate wealth to power, then it follows that a more equitable distribution of wealth will lead to a fairer distribution of power. For many Marxists this involves eradicating the capitalist system.



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Criticisms of Marxism

Pluralists feel that Marxists are ignoring the beneficial advantages that the poor have achieved through the capitalist system. Not only do western Europeans enjoy living standards among the highest in the world but they have also benefited from free education and a comprehensive welfare system. They also feel that Marxists ignore the social mobility that exists in society.

Furthermore, people have had the opportunities to choose Marxist parties at election but have generally refused to do so. Electorates wanting left of centre policies have mainly opted for social democratic parties.

A further criticism is that whilst Marxists may have correctly identified flaws within capitalism, their notion of overthrowing that system is wholly unrealistic. A more realistic approach would be 'managed capitalism' whereby governments work within the system whilst trying to alleviate and mitigate its negative impacts. This is essentially what China has been doing for the last decade. Ten years ago it had almost half of the world's poor but it has since lifted vast numbers above the [poverty line](#). This is in contrast to the experimenting 'outside of the system' that was [tried](#) in Communist Eastern Europe and which met with long term economic failure.

There is also an argument that Marxists are guilty of ignoring the realities of the human condition. Capitalism could not have flourished without the existence of ambition and greed. Perhaps it is inevitable that some people will prosper where others do not. Inherent in this view is that the engineering of social outcomes is impossible. It is far better to engage in offering people equality of opportunity and allowing their own qualities to flourish and make the difference. This is what the late 19th Century Liberal philosopher T.H. Green referred to as 'Positive Liberty'.

Elite theorists believe that Marxists are being naïve if they think that they can engineer a system of equality. They believe that an elite grouping will inevitably emerge regardless of the economic system that is in place. They point to the experience of those states that experimented with Communism in the second half of the twentieth century as proof of this. New elites emerged within the Communist parties and they enjoyed all the benefits and privileges of traditional elites.

Many feminists feel that, whilst there is some validity in the notion of economic exploitation, too little attention has been paid to the specific exploitation of women. There is a division of labour that exists within the home that is as pronounced as the division between the classes. Furthermore they feel that the Marxist theory does not go far enough in addressing the cultural values that consign women to inferior roles in society and which lead to their wider exclusion from power. Those feminists that see no value in Marxism as a theory believe that its focus on capitalism as the source of all of society's ills is ignoring many other aspects of life that entrench patriarchy.



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Feminism

Feminism is the belief that power in society is based on gender divisions. Thus all societies are essentially Patriarchies (ruled by men). The roots of patriarchy are based around the physical, domestic, legal, political, economic and social frameworks that determine the position of women within society which leads to their exclusion from real power. Statistically, women are **severely underrepresented** in politics, business and the media.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, English writer, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) which many people see as the starting point for Feminism. She identified that the legal, political and economic structures of society combined to keep women subservient. Married women had no rights of their own and were essentially their husband's legal property. Even the taking of a husband's name symbolised the end of the person as an individual. Or note the practice of a father 'giving a daughter away'. Women were trapped in this situation as they did not have economic independence. Their different education and the fact that many 18th and 19th century jobs were labour intensive meant that they depended on the husband for survival. The prospect of children also exacerbated this and pregnancy made work untenable.

Though more common with later feminists, Wollstonecraft also noted how many women played a role in their own subjection by conforming to the stereotypes that society gave them. So, a woman might wish to have the same sexual freedom as a man but then contradict this by indulging in an over-romanticised version of love.

Of course, the major barrier to women was their exclusion from the right to vote. As this is the primary means by which power is ultimately exercised then women did not have the ability to influence political outcomes. Unsurprisingly the struggle for the franchise was the focal point for the early feminist movement.





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In spite of the legal equality achieved by women during the first half of the twentieth century, women continued to be excluded from power. A second wave of Feminism emerged concentrating on the social modelling that women were expected to conform to. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and **Betty Friedan's** *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) inspired what became known as the 'women's liberation movement.' They argued that social stereotypes, **gender roles** and attitudes to female behaviour conspired to keep women subservient to men and promoted an acceptance that women were inferior. To behave in any other manner was to be 'un-feminine' and this social coercion was used as the basis to prevent women from challenging the existing power structures. These roles are reinforced by the media, education, religion and society.

Even the word '**feminist**' has been manipulated to seem threatening. This has extended to the view that certain jobs are 'male preserves.' Recent increases in the number of female MPs in Parliament prompted the media to use phrases such as 'Blair's Babes' and 'Cameron's Cuties'.

There are other methods of categorising feminism.

- **Liberal feminists** – This concentrates on the unequal position of women within society particularly within politics, business and economics. It suggests that this lack of advancement can be addressed by introducing legal measures that will remove barriers.
- **Socialist feminists** – This particular form of feminism diagnoses capitalism as being the true root of patriarchy. If capitalism is addressed then so too will patriarchy.
- **Radical feminists** – This strand sees males as perpetuating patriarchy by using the family unit as an agent of oppression. This confines women to a specific set of roles in society and creates extra barriers to their true emancipation.

Third wave feminism was a phrase first coined by Rebecca Walker and it expressed a frustration with how feminism had become overly focussed on the status of white, middle class women in western societies. It had become a movement too mired in academia and concentrated on issues such as equal pay for high earners, equality in the boardroom and the language of political correctness. For the vast majority of the world's women these issues are not relevant to their lives. The problems of physical abuse, childhood marriage, the denial of education, disenfranchisement and living below the poverty line are the **daily reality** of over a billion women on the planet.



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Criticisms of Feminism

Marxists would claim to recognise that women are underrepresented in the 'power roles' in society but put forward the view that this can be solved by addressing capitalism. They see the family as part of the capitalist hegemony. By eliminating capitalism all of humanity will benefit and women will see their position improve.

Elitists would also recognise this inequality of representation but would see it as part of the 'life circumstances' that generate elites in the first place. If women are underrepresented in elite positions then this is reflective of their overall position in society. Elite theorists would not be adverse to improving the rights of women but would argue that in terms of having access to an 'elite power' grouping, it would be a different set of characteristics other than gender that would allow for this.

Pluralists look at the progress made by women in social, legal and political terms. Whilst still underrepresented, they have made significant legal, political and social advances. Britain has had a female Prime Minister and Angela Merkel, Hilary Clinton and Christine Lagarde are among the most influential politicians in the world. Canada, moreover, has a cabinet that is deliberately gender balanced.

Conservative critics of feminism would argue that some women choose the role of mother and housewife. Whilst recognising that the denial of rights in the Third World is wrong, they feel that in the West, women have been granted legal equality and that is the fullest extent to which any government can mould society. They question whether the gender difference is socially constructed or mere human nature.

When evaluating the different theories of power in Q5 of your examination for this unit, it is important to have a critique of each approach. You can practice this by having a spider diagram stating the potential arguments against each theory. So, for a critique of Pluralism, your headings might be Marxist Critique, Elite Critique, Feminist critique and Other.



Credits

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