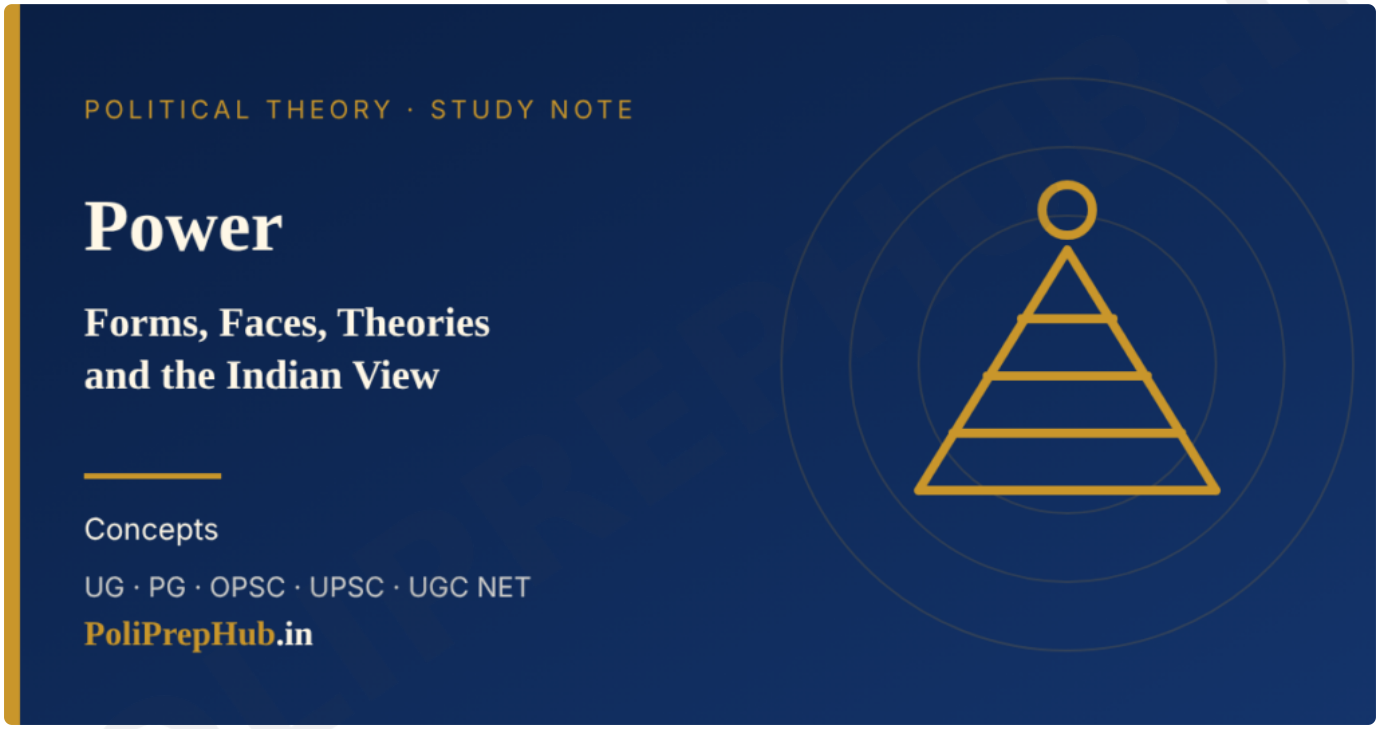
POLITICAL THEORY

Power: Definitions, Forms, Faces, Theories and the Indian Perspective

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • November 11, 2026 • 28 min read



Power is one of the oldest and most important ideas in political theory. Every political system, from a village council to a modern state, deals with the question of who can make decisions, who can make others obey, and by what means. Thinkers have often said that politics is about power. Machiavelli studied how a prince could gain and keep it, Hobbes made it the base of the state, and Max Weber made it the centre of modern sociology and political science. Yet the idea is not simple. Power can be seen in the soldier’s gun, the judge’s order, the rich man’s money, the teacher’s knowledge and even in the habits of thought that people take for granted.

Because of this, scholars have given many different answers to what power is, who has it, how it works and whether it is good or bad. Some see power as the ability to force others, others see it as the ability to act together, and others see it as a hidden force which shapes what people want. In this note we study the meaning and definitions of power, its nature and forms, the main theories and the three faces of power, the Indian ideas on power, the importance and limits of the concept, and the main critical debates.

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1. Meaning and definitions of power

In everyday speech, power means the ability to do something. In political theory, it means the ability of a person, group or institution to affect the conduct of others, so that they do what they would not otherwise do. It is always connected with a relation between actors, and not only with strength or force. The word comes from the Latin *potere*, meaning to be able.

Scholar	Understanding of power
Max Weber	The chance that an actor in a social relation will carry out his own will even against resistance
Robert Dahl	A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do
Bertrand Russell	The production of intended effects
Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan	Participation in the making of decisions
Hans Morgenthau	Man’s control over the minds and actions of other men
Talcott Parsons	The capacity to mobilise resources for the attainment of collective goals
Hannah Arendt	The human ability to act together, which is different from violence
Michel Foucault	A network of relations that exists everywhere and produces knowledge, norms and persons
Steven Lukes	The ability to affect others’ interests, by decisions, by control of agenda and by shaping their wishes

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Scholar-wise definitions.

- **Max Weber** (*Economy and Society*, 1922) defined power as the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance. His definition is the starting point for most later work. It stresses that power is a chance or probability, that it appears in a relation between people, and that it is shown

when there is resistance.

- **Robert Dahl** (“The Concept of Power”, 1957) gave an intuitive definition: A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do. Dahl’s idea led the behavioural study of power, which looked at observable decisions and at who succeeds in getting their way.
- **Bertrand Russell** (*Power: A New Social Analysis*, 1938) called power the production of intended effects. He held that power is as basic in social science as energy in physics, and that it takes different forms, such as wealth, armies, civil authority and influence on opinion.
- **Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan** (*Power and Society*, 1950) saw power as the participation in making decisions, and said that the political process is the shaping and sharing of power.
- **Hans Morgenthau** (*Politics Among Nations*, 1948) held that politics, especially international politics, is a struggle for power, and he defined power as man’s control over the minds and actions of other men.
- **Talcott Parsons** (“On the Concept of Political Power”, 1963) argued that power is not a zero-sum thing but a capacity of the system to achieve collective goals, like money in an economy. On this view, power can grow as a society’s ability to act grows.
- **Hannah Arendt** (*On Violence*, 1970) said that power belongs to a group and exists only while the group stays together. She held that power and violence are opposites: violence can destroy power but cannot create it.
- **Michel Foucault** (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975; *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 1976) said that power is not owned by a person or a state but is a set of relations spread through society. It works through knowledge, rules and everyday practices, and it produces subjects as well as restricts them.
- **Steven Lukes** (*Power: A Radical View*, 1974; second edition 2005) said that power is shown in three ways: in winning decisions, in controlling the agenda, and in shaping people’s desires and beliefs. For him, power is the ability to affect others’ interests.

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Power and related concepts. Power is often confused with other ideas. The following differences help to keep them clear.

Concept	Meaning	Difference from power
Force	Physical compulsion or violence	Force is one means of power, and is the last resort
Coercion	Threat of harm to make someone act	A form of power that works through fear
Influence	Ability to affect others without threat or command	Softer than power, and depends on persuasion or example
Persuasion	Convincing others by argument	Works through reason and the free choice of the other
Manipulation	Getting others to act by hidden means	Power that hides its source
Authority	Right to command, accepted as legitimate by others	Power that is accepted as rightful
Legitimacy	Belief that power is rightful	The base that turns power into authority

2. Nature, forms and bases of power

Nature and characteristics of power.

1. **Power is a relation.** Power does not belong to a thing or a person alone. It exists between two or more actors, and a person who has no one to command has no power. A teacher has power over students in a classroom, but the same teacher may have none in a market. This is why Dahl and Weber speak of A having power over B.
2. **Power is unequal and asymmetrical.** In most power relations, one side is stronger than the other. A landlord and a tenant, an officer and a clerk, or a state and a citizen are not equals. The inequality may be small or large, and it may change, but without some inequality, there would be no need of power.
3. **Power involves resistance or a possible conflict of wishes.** Weber stressed that power shows itself even against resistance. A person may obey willingly, but the power is

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clear when he would have refused if he could. In a strike, for example, the strength of the employer and the workers is tested by resistance.

4. **Power is potential as well as actual.** A person may have power without using it. The presence of a police force or an army, even when it does nothing, makes people obey the law. This is called latent or potential power, and it often works through fear of what may happen.
5. **Power is multi-dimensional.** It has many sources, such as force, wealth, knowledge, numbers, organisation, office and prestige, and there are many fields of power, such as political, economic, social and cultural. A rich industrialist, a priest and a general may all hold power in different ways.
6. **Power is dynamic and changes over time.** The distribution of power changes with new technology, new ideas and new groups. The rise of the printing press, of labour unions or of social media has shifted power from older groups to new ones. No one holds power for ever.
7. **Power is context-dependent.** A person's power depends on the setting and the issue. Dahl's study of New Haven found that different groups had power on different issues. A person strong in one area, such as education, may be weak in another, such as city planning.
8. **Power is exercised through many means.** These include force, threat, reward, persuasion, argument, control of information and the creation of belief. Power that works by consent is more stable than power that rests only on force.
9. **Power may be visible or hidden.** Some power is seen in open decisions, such as a law passed by the legislature, and some is hidden, such as the power to keep an issue off the agenda or to shape what people think. Bachrach, Baratz and Lukes stressed this point.
10. **Power is both limiting and enabling.** It can restrict people, as in a prison, but it can also make action possible, as when a government builds roads and schools. Arendt and Parsons stressed this positive side, in contrast to the idea that power is only domination.
11. **Power is not always a zero-sum thing.** In some views, such as the one held by Parsons and Arendt, power can increase when people cooperate, so one party's gain need

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not be another's loss. In other views, such as those of Weber and Dahl, power is often a competition in which one's gain is the other's loss.

12. **Power is connected with legitimacy.** Power which people accept as rightful is stable and cheap to maintain, while power which rests only on force is costly and weak. Rulers therefore try to give their power a moral and legal basis, which links the idea to authority and legitimacy.

Forms and types of power.

Type	Meaning	Example
Coercive power	Compelling by force or threat	Police action, military rule
Remunerative or utilitarian power	Influencing through rewards, wages or benefits	Salaries, subsidies, contracts
Normative or symbolic power	Influencing through values, honour and moral appeal	Religious leaders, respected teachers
Political power	Ability to make and enforce collective decisions	Parliament, government, courts
Economic power	Control over wealth, production and jobs	Large companies, banks
Social power	Influence from status, caste, class or community	Dominant castes, clan elders
Ideological power	Shaping beliefs, values and meanings	Media, schools, religion
Military power	Control of organised violence	Army, police
Hard power	Influence through force and payment	Sanctions, military threat
Soft power	Influence through attraction and culture	Cinema, music, yoga
Smart power	Combination of hard and soft power	A foreign policy mixing diplomacy and force
Structural power	Power built into the way an economy or system works	Control of finance and trade rules

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Classifications by scholars.

- **Amitai Etzioni** (*A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations*, 1961) divided power in organisations into coercive, remunerative and normative types, which depend on physical force, material rewards and symbolic rewards.
- **John Kenneth Galbraith** (*The Anatomy of Power*, 1983) spoke of condign power (that wins by punishment), compensatory power (that wins by reward) and conditioning power (that wins by changing belief).
- **Joseph Nye** (*Bound to Lead*, 1990; *Soft Power*, 2004) separated hard power, which depends on force and money, from soft power, which depends on attraction through culture, values and policies.
- **Michael Mann** (*The Sources of Social Power*, vol. 1, 1986) held that there are four sources of social power: ideological, economic, military and political, which together shape societies.
- **Power over, power to and power with.** Feminist and other writers such as Mary Parker Follett and Nancy Hartsock distinguished “power over” (domination), “power to” (the ability to act and achieve) and “power with” (the strength people gain by acting together).

Bases of social power. John French and Bertram Raven (1959) listed five bases of social power.

Base	Meaning	Example
Reward power	Ability to give benefits	A manager who gives promotion
Coercive power	Ability to punish	A policeman who can arrest
Legitimate power	Position that people accept as giving a right to command	A judge or an elected minister
Expert power	Special knowledge and skill	A doctor, an engineer

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Referent power	Respect and desire to be like the person	A popular leader, a role model

3. Theories of power and the faces of power

Realist view. Realist thinkers, from Machiavelli and Hobbes to Hans Morgenthau, see power as the central fact of politics. Hobbes held that human beings desire “power after power” and that a strong sovereign is needed to avoid chaos. Morgenthau said that international politics is a struggle for power, in which each state tries to keep, increase or show power. This view treats power as a thing that can be measured through resources such as army, economy and population. Critics say that it is too narrow, since it ignores the role of consent, rules and cooperation.

Pluralist view. Robert Dahl, in *Who Governs?* (1961), studied decision-making in New Haven, a city in the United States, and found that no single group controlled all the decisions. Different groups, such as business leaders, officials, parties and civic bodies, had power on different issues, and power was spread among many. Pluralists hold that in a democracy, power is divided and that groups compete and bargain. Critics, such as Bachrach and Baratz, answered that this study looked only at visible decisions and ignored the groups whose demands never reached the table.

Elite theory. Gaetano Mosca (*The Ruling Class*, 1896) and Vilfredo Pareto held that in every society a small minority rules over the majority. Robert Michels (*Political Parties*, 1911) put forward the “iron law of oligarchy”, which says that every organisation, even a democratic one, comes under the control of a small group of leaders. C. Wright Mills, in *The Power Elite* (1956), argued that in the United States power was held by a circle of leaders from the military, big business and the government. Elite theorists say that power is always concentrated, and not spread widely as pluralists claim.

Marxist view. For Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, power rests on ownership of the means of production. The ruling class controls the state, the law and the ideas of a society. Later Marxists developed this. Antonio Gramsci spoke of **hegemony**, which means that the ruling

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class holds power not only by force but also by winning the consent of the people through culture, schools, religion and the media. Ralph Miliband (*The State in Capitalist Society*, 1969) and Nicos Poulantzas (*Political Power and Social Classes*, 1968) argued about how far the state is an instrument of the capitalist class and how far it has its own autonomy. Louis Althusser spoke of the ideological state apparatuses, such as school and church, that spread the ruling ideas.

Arendt's view of power as acting together. Hannah Arendt rejected the idea that power is the same as command or violence. She held that power arises when people act in concert, and it lasts as long as they stay united. A government that loses the support of its people loses power, even if it has weapons, and uses violence to hide the loss. She thus gave a positive and democratic meaning to power.

Foucault's view of power. Michel Foucault departed from the idea that power belongs to the state or the ruling class. For him, power is everywhere and comes from everywhere, and it works through institutions like the prison, the school, the clinic and the army. It produces knowledge, norms and persons, and not only restricts them. He wrote of **disciplinary power**, which controls bodies through observation and training, as in the model of the Panopticon, and of **biopower**, which manages populations through health, birth and death rates, and **governmentality**, the art of governing conduct. He also said that where there is power there is resistance. His work has shaped the study of power in the humanities and social sciences, though critics say it gives little guidance for political action.

Feminist view. Feminist writers like Kate Millett (*Sexual Politics*, 1970) argued that the relationship between men and women is a power relation, and that patriarchy is a system of male domination found in the family, the law and the economy. They hold that politics begins in the private sphere, which is why they say "the personal is political". Writers such as Nancy Hartsock (*Money, Sex, and Power*, 1983) also stressed "power to" and "power with", the ability of women to act and to build strength together.

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Structural and ideological theories. Others, such as Michael Mann and Susan Strange, studied structures in the economy, military and ideology that give some actors lasting advantages. Strange spoke of structural power in finance, production, security and knowledge, which shapes the options open to others.

The three faces of power. One of the best-known ways of studying power is to separate it into faces or dimensions.

Face	Scholar	What power means	What is studied	Example
First face (decision-making)	Robert Dahl	Winning in open decisions where there is conflict of interests	Who prevails in decisions	A lobby that defeats a bill in the legislature
Second face (agenda-setting)	Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz	Controlling the agenda so that some issues are never decided	Non-decisions and the "mobilisation of bias"	A committee that keeps land reform off the agenda
Third face (preference-shaping)	Steven Lukes	Shaping people's wishes and beliefs so that they accept their position	Ideology, socialisation and hidden control	Belief that caste or poverty is natural and cannot change

- **First face.** In Dahl's pluralist view, power is seen when A succeeds over B in a decision on which they differ. The researcher looks at observable behaviour, key decisions and recorded preferences. This view is clear and testable, but it misses power that works outside the open contest.
- **Second face.** In their article "Two Faces of Power" (1962), Bachrach and Baratz argued that power also means the ability to prevent some issues from coming up at all. Those who control the agenda and the rules can keep demands from being heard, which they called non-decision-making and the mobilisation of bias. This view added hidden power to the study, but still looked for observable conflict.
- **Third face.** Steven Lukes, in *Power: A Radical View* (1974), said that the most effective power is the one that prevents conflict from arising by shaping what people think and want. People may accept an unjust order as natural or inevitable, and thus never complain. John Gaventa's study *Power and Powerlessness* (1980), of mining families in

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Appalachia, showed how long inequality led to acceptance. Critics have asked how one can show that someone's wishes have been shaped, since one must say what their "real interests" are.

- **Fourth face.** Some writers, such as Digeser (1992), add Foucault's idea of power as something which produces the very subjects and identities of people, and call this the fourth face of power. It looks at how norms and discourses create the subject.

4. The Indian perspective on power

Kautilya's Arthashastra. Kautilya (Chanakya) treated power (*shakti*) as the base of statecraft. In the *Arthashastra*, he spoke of three kinds of power of a king: *prabhu-shakti*, the power of the treasury and the army; *mantra-shakti*, the power of counsel and wise advice; and *utsaha-shakti*, the power of energy and will. A king with all three could win over others. He also gave great importance to *danda*, the power of punishment, which keeps order in society and protects the weak against the strong. Without danda, he said, the strong would eat the weak, as the big fish eat the small (*matsya-nyaya*). His idea of the *mandala* (circle of states) is also a theory of power in the relations among states. Kautilya thus combined the use of force, wealth and wisdom, and gave a clear realist view of power.

Danda and dharma in the Dharmashastra and Mahabharata. In the epic and Dharmashastra tradition, the king's power was bound by dharma, which meant that the ruler could use danda only according to law and justice. The *Shanti Parva* of the Mahabharata describes the king as the protector of the people, who rules for their welfare. Power therefore was not only force, but a duty. This is a way of linking power with moral limits, as in the later idea of legitimate authority.

Gandhi on power.

- **Two kinds of power.** In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Gandhi set against brute force, which depends on violence, the force of the soul (*atma-bal* or *satyagraha*), which depends on truth and non-violence. He held that true power lies in the people, and that no ruler can rule without their cooperation, so that non-cooperation can take away power.

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- **Swaraj.** For him, real power meant self-rule, where each person controls himself and where villages govern themselves, and not the mere capture of the state. He feared that a strong centralised state would become an instrument of violence.
- **Link to Arendt.** Many scholars note a resemblance to Arendt's view that power depends on people's consent and cooperation, though Gandhi grounded it in moral and spiritual ideas.

Ambedkar on social and political power. B. R. Ambedkar saw that the caste system was a system of social power, which kept a large part of society in a position of inferiority by birth. He said that political power was a key to the social progress of the oppressed and urged them to gain it through voting rights, representation and organisation. He also warned, in his speech of 1949 to the Constituent Assembly, that political equality would exist alongside social and economic inequality and that this could threaten democracy. His analysis shows how social and political power are linked.

Caste, class and power in Indian society.

- **Dominant caste.** M. N. Srinivas (1959) used the term dominant caste for a caste with a large numbers, much land and a high place in the local order, which controls village life and politics. Landowning groups such as Jats, Yadavs, Marathas, Reddys and Vokkaligas have held power in their regions.
- **Caste and politics.** Rajni Kothari, in *Politics in India* (1970), argued that caste became an arena of political competition, in which the parties used caste ties to build support, and that politics changed caste in turn.
- **Elite and masses.** Scholars have studied how the English-educated elite, the landowners and the urban middle classes controlled power in the early years of independence, and how new groups, such as backward classes and Dalits, gained a share later through democratic politics.

The Indian state and power.

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- **Rudolphs on the state.** Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, in *In Pursuit of Lakshmi* (1987), described the Indian state as having a “command polity” side and a “demand polity” side, in which the state commands and is also pressed by many groups.
- **Partha Chatterjee.** In *The Politics of the Governed* (2004), he argued that most Indians relate to the state not as full citizens with rights but as populations to be governed and given welfare, and so they bargain through political society.
- **Constitutional limits on power.** The Constitution of India limits power by the rule of law, fundamental rights, separation of powers, federalism, judicial review and independent bodies such as the Election Commission, which show how modern democratic power is bound by rules.
- **Grassroots power.** The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1992) set up Panchayati Raj and municipal bodies, which aimed to bring power to the people at the local level, and reserved seats for women and for Scheduled Castes and Tribes.
- **Social movements and resistance.** The Right to Information Act of 2005 and movements of workers, farmers, Dalits and Adivasis are examples of citizens using non-electoral power, as in Foucault’s idea that resistance accompanies power.

5. Importance and limitations of the concept of power

Importance.

- **Central to understanding politics.** Many thinkers define politics as the study of power, and so the concept helps to explain how decisions are made, who benefits and who is left out.
- **Explains the state and government.** The state is the highest holder of public power, and the concept of power helps to study its structure, limits and use, such as the army, the police, taxation and law.
- **Basis for studying democracy.** The idea of power allows us to ask whether power is shared, whether it is accountable and whether all citizens have a voice, which are central questions of democratic theory.

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- **Link to authority and legitimacy.** The study of power leads to the study of when power is accepted as right, which is needed to understand obedience, stability and revolution.
- **Understanding inequality.** By showing how power works through class, caste, gender and race, the concept helps to explain social and economic inequality, and the ways in which it may be reduced.
- **Understanding hidden control.** The ideas of agenda-setting, ideology and hegemony show that power often works silently, and so help to study media, education and culture.
- **Foundation of international relations.** The concept of power, including hard and soft power, is basic to the study of war, diplomacy, alliances and the balance of power among states.
- **Guide to limiting power.** Knowing how power works helps societies to design checks and balances, such as constitutions, separation of powers and rights, in order to prevent its abuse.
- **Understanding resistance and change.** By pointing to resistance, the concept explains social movements, protests and revolutions, and how weaker groups gain power.
- **Tool for policy and administration.** In public policy, the idea helps to study who influences policy, how interest groups work and how governments secure compliance.

Limitations and difficulties of the concept.

- **Lack of agreed meaning.** W. B. Gallie called power an “essentially contested concept”, which means that scholars cannot agree on its definition, because each definition carries a political position. This makes the study of power uncertain.
- **Difficulty of measurement.** Power is hard to measure, because it is often latent or hidden. One cannot easily tell whether an actor who got what he wanted was powerful or just lucky.
- **Confusion with related ideas.** Power is often mixed up with force, influence, authority and resources, and this reduces clarity unless they are separated.

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- **Over-stress on conflict.** Weber’s and Dahl’s definitions look for conflict and resistance, and so may miss the power that works by consent, cooperation or the shaping of wishes.
- **Problem of real interests.** The third-dimension view asks us to say what people’s real interests are, when their expressed wishes differ, and critics say that this lets the researcher decide, which may be arbitrary.
- **Difficulty of finding who holds power.** In modern societies, power is spread across states, markets, media and global institutions, so it is hard to find a single holder. Foucault’s idea makes it harder still.
- **Risk of a purely negative view.** Many accounts stress domination and neglect the enabling side of power, such as the power to build institutions and to cooperate, which Arendt and Parsons stressed.
- **Western bias.** Many theories were developed from Western experience, and may not fully explain power in societies where caste, kinship and religion play important roles, and so need to be tested in other contexts.
- **Ideological bias.** Pluralists, elite theorists and Marxists each choose a model which supports their view of society, so the same facts may be read in different ways.
- **Too broad a concept.** If power is found everywhere, as in Foucault’s view, the concept may lose its power to distinguish between cases and to guide action.

6. Critical analysis

The study of power shows a long debate between two broad pictures. In the first picture, power is a capacity of one actor to get another to do something, and it can be seen in decisions, resources and conflict. Weber and Dahl belong to this picture, and it has the merit of being clear and open to testing. Its weakness is that it sees only the visible part of power. Bachrach and Baratz, and later Lukes, showed that the most effective power may be the power that keeps issues off the agenda or that shapes what people want, so that no conflict appears at all. A researcher who counts only open decisions will therefore conclude that power is widely shared, when in fact it may be tightly held.

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In the second picture, power is a social relation that runs through institutions, language and everyday practice. Foucault, Gramsci and the feminist writers belong to this picture. It explains well why subordinate groups often accept their position, and why reforms of formal law do not always change real conditions. Its weakness is that, when power is found everywhere, it becomes difficult to say who is responsible for a wrong, or how it can be ended. Critics such as Nancy Fraser have asked Foucault for a clear standard by which to say that one form of power is better than another.

The debate between pluralists and elite theorists is also unsettled. Pluralists point to the competition of parties, interest groups and movements as proof that no single group rules. Elite theorists answer that the competition takes place within limits set by a small circle, and that the resources of wealth, organisation and knowledge are unequally spread. Studies of the Indian experience support both sides. Elections, regional parties and the entry of backward classes and Dalits into politics show wide sharing of power, while the continuing hold of dominant castes, business houses and bureaucratic elites shows its unequal distribution.

A further point is the relation between power and morality. Realists such as Morgenthau and Kautilya treat power as the natural aim of politics and ask how it can be gained and kept. Gandhi and Arendt ask what kind of power is worth having, and answer that power based on consent and cooperation is more lasting than power based on fear. The experience of many regimes that fell when the people withdrew their obedience lends support to this second view, yet the continued existence of harsh rule in many countries shows that coercion can also last for long.

For the student of politics, the lesson is that no single theory is enough. Power should be studied at several levels: in open decisions, in the control of agendas, in the shaping of beliefs, and in the institutions and habits of daily life. It should also be studied for its enabling side, since the same power that dominates can also be used to build, protect and cooperate. A balanced view will treat power as a necessary feature of social life, which has to be checked by law, rights and public accountability rather than wished away.

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7. Authors and books for UGC NET

Author	Book or work	Main contribution on power
Max Weber	*Economy and Society*	Defined power as the chance to carry out one's will despite resistance; linked it with domination and legitimate authority
Robert Dahl	"The Concept of Power" (1957); *Who Governs?* (1961)	Behavioural definition of power; pluralist study of New Haven
Bertrand Russell	*Power: A New Social Analysis* (1938)	Power as the production of intended effects; forms of power such as priestly, kingly, economic
Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan	*Power and Society* (1950)	Power as participation in the making of decisions
Hans Morgenthau	*Politics Among Nations* (1948)	Power as man's control over the minds and actions of others; realist view of international politics
Talcott Parsons	"On the Concept of Political Power" (1963)	Power as a generalised capacity to get collective goals achieved
Hannah Arendt	*On Violence* (1970); *The Human Condition* (1958)	Power as acting in concert; distinction from violence
Michel Foucault	*Discipline and Punish* (1975); *The History of Sexuality* (1976)	Power as spread through relations, discipline and knowledge; power and resistance
Steven Lukes	*Power: A Radical View* (1974)	Three dimensions of power
Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz	"Two Faces of Power" (1962)	Non-decision-making and agenda control
C. Wright Mills	*The Power Elite* (1956)	Elite theory of American society
Antonio Gramsci	*Prison Notebooks*	Hegemony and consent
John French and Bertram Raven	"The Bases of Social Power" (1959)	Five bases of social power

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Joseph Nye	*Soft Power* (2004)	Hard power and soft power in world politics
Michael Mann	*The Sources of Social Power*	Ideological, economic, military and political sources of power
Kautilya	*Arthashastra*	Danda and the three shaktis in statecraft
M. K. Gandhi	*Hind Swaraj*	Soul force and self-rule
M. N. Srinivas	“The Dominant Caste in Rampura” (1959)	Dominant caste and village power
Rajni Kothari	*Politics in India* (1970)	Caste and competitive politics

8. Practice questions

Long answer questions

- Define power and discuss its nature, forms and bases with reference to Weber, Dahl, Russell and French and Raven.
- Explain the three dimensions (faces) of power as given by Dahl, Bachrach and Baratz, and Lukes. Why is the third dimension called a radical view?
- Compare the pluralist, elite, Marxist and Foucauldian theories of power.
- Discuss the Indian perspective on power with reference to Kautilya, Gandhi and Ambedkar.
- Critically examine the concept of power as an essentially contested concept.

Medium answer questions

- Distinguish between power and authority.
- Explain Hannah Arendt’s distinction between power and violence.
- Describe Foucault’s idea of power as productive and everywhere.
- What are the bases of social power according to French and Raven?
- Explain Nye’s idea of soft power.
- Write a note on Kautilya’s three shaktis and danda.

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Short answer questions

- Define power in the words of Max Weber.
- What is non-decision-making?
- What is meant by power over, power to and power with?
- State the meaning of hegemony.
- What is the dominant caste?

Very short answer questions

- Who wrote *Power: A Radical View*?
- Name the author of *The Power Elite*.
- What is matsya-nyaya?
- Who gave the idea of soft power?
- Name the book in which Gandhi discussed soul force.

Objective questions

1. The definition of power as the chance to carry out one's will despite resistance is given by (a) Dahl (b) Weber (c) Arendt (d) Foucault.
2. The three faces of power were set out by (a) Lukes (b) Mills (c) Parsons (d) Mann.
3. Power as acting in concert is the view of (a) Russell (b) Morgenthau (c) Arendt (d) Lasswell.
4. The *Arthashastra* mentions the three shaktis as (a) prabhu, mantra and utsaha (b) dharma, artha and kama (c) sama, dana and bheda (d) raja, amatya and mitra.
5. "Two Faces of Power" was written by (a) Bachrach and Baratz (b) Dahl and Lindblom (c) Easton and Almond (d) Weber and Parsons.
6. The term hegemony is associated with (a) Gramsci (b) Marx (c) Locke (d) Hobbes.
7. The concept of soft power was developed by (a) Joseph Nye (b) Henry Kissinger (c) Kenneth Waltz (d) Hedley Bull.

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8. The term dominant caste was used by (a) Ghurye (b) Srinivas (c) Dumont (d) Beteille.

Analytical prompts

- Is power always a bad thing in politics, or can it also be a force for good? Argue with examples from India.
- Can the third face of power be tested by evidence, or does it depend on the researcher's own values?
- How far does the Panchayati Raj system change the distribution of power in rural India?
- Does social media shift power from the state to the citizen, or does it create new forms of control?

Key takeaways

- Power is the capacity to influence or control the behaviour of others, and it is the central concept of politics.
- Power differs from force, influence and authority, though the terms are closely linked.
- Scholars see power as a relation, a resource, a capacity to act together, or a web of social practices.
- Power has many bases, such as reward, coercion, legitimacy, expertise and reference.
- Dahl, Bachrach and Baratz, and Lukes describe three faces of power: decisions, agenda-setting and the shaping of wishes.
- Pluralists, elite theorists, Marxists, feminists and Foucault give different accounts of who holds power and how.
- Kautilya stressed danda and the three shaktis, Gandhi stressed soul force and self-rule, and Ambedkar stressed political power for social change.
- Power is an essentially contested concept, and it must be checked by law, rights and accountability.

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Twenty books for further reading

1. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*
2. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*
3. Robert Dahl, *Who Governs?*
4. Bertrand Russell, *Power: A New Social Analysis*
5. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*
6. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*
7. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*
8. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*
9. Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*
10. Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*
11. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*
12. Kautilya, *The Arthashastra* (trans. R. P. Kangle)
13. M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*
14. B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*
15. Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India*
16. M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*
17. Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi*
18. Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*
19. Rajeev Bhargava and Ashok Acharya (eds.), *Political Theory: An Introduction*
20. Andrew Heywood, *Politics*

Frequently asked questions

What is power in political science? Power is the ability of a person, group or state to influence or control the actions and decisions of others, whether by force, reward, persuasion or the shaping of beliefs.

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How is power different from authority? Power is the capacity to get one's way, while authority is power that is accepted as rightful by those who obey. A tax-collector with a legal office has authority, while a robber with a gun has only power.

What are the three faces of power? The first face is the power to win open decisions; the second is the power to control the agenda and keep issues out; the third is the power to shape people's wishes and beliefs.

What is soft power? Soft power, a term of Joseph Nye, is the ability to get what one wants by attraction, culture and values rather than by force or payment.

Why is power called an essentially contested concept? Because scholars hold different values and so cannot agree on one definition. Each definition suggests a different view of society.

How did Gandhi understand power? Gandhi held that true power lies in the moral force of truth and non-violence and in the cooperation of the people, and that rulers lose power when the people refuse to cooperate.

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