ಸೃಜನಿ

SRUJANI: Indian Journal of Innovative Research and Development (SIJIRD)
Volume-5 Issue-4, September-October 2026, Pp. 211-220
Bi-Monthly, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Indexed Journal

I S S N: 2583-3510

SIRDF JOURNALS
editor@srujani.in
www.srujani.in

State Legitimacy and Authority

Dr. Shripad Kulkarni
Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University College of Arts, Tumkur

Abstract:

State legitimacy remains a major concern in political thought because governments do more than use power: they also claim a justified entitlement to govern and issue decisions that citizens must follow. This article explores the connection between legitimacy and political authority by considering classical social-contract arguments, Max Weber's sociological explanation of accepted rule, and modern perspectives on democracy, justice, and accountability. It distinguishes people's belief that a government has a right to rule from the moral question of whether that belief is justified, and from the separate issue of administrative effectiveness. A comparison of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Max Weber, John Rawls and Joseph Raz demonstrates that security, consent, popular participation, legality and justice provide related but distinct grounds for political power. The article maintains that none of these factors can establish legitimacy on its own. A government may be lawful but unfair, supported by many yet oppressive, or administratively successful but beyond public scrutiny. Legitimate authority therefore depends on lawful institutions, equal citizenship, reasons that can be publicly defended, protection of rights and effective ways to identify and remedy misuse of power. Legitimacy is consequently not a permanent status secured when a state is founded; it must be continually sustained through just and accountable government.

Keywords: *State legitimacy; political authority; social contract; consent; rule of law; democracy; political obligation; accountability.*

Introduction

The state is one of the most influential organizations in contemporary social life. It creates and enforces laws, raises revenue, maintains public order, defends its territory, delivers public services and, where necessary, exercises coercive force. However, having the ability to issue commands does not automatically give a government the right to do so. Even an administration equipped with police forces, courts and an extensive bureaucracy must answer a basic question:

Please cite this article as: Shripad Kulkarni. (2026). State Legitimacy and Authority. *SRUJANI: Indian Journal of Innovative Research and Development,* 5(4), 211–220

on what grounds should people accept its decisions as binding? This question lies at the heart of political legitimacy.

Political authority means the claimed entitlement of an institution to issue instructions and enforce them within an accepted framework. Legitimacy asks whether that entitlement can be justified. A government might be capable of controlling society and obtaining obedience without having a morally sound basis for ruling. Compliance created by fear may preserve order for a time, but fear by itself cannot make authority legitimate. In the opposite situation, a government may possess fair laws and a defensible moral purpose while lacking the administrative strength needed to put its decisions into practice.

This debate has practical consequences for constitutional arrangements, elections, individual freedoms, demonstrations, and taxation, policing and welfare policies. People in plural societies often hold different religious beliefs, cultural identities, and economic interests. The central difficulty is to establish public institutions whose authority can be defended to citizens who do not all share the same outlook. The argument developed here is that legitimacy depends both on the way political power is authorized and on the manner in which it is used.

Conceptual Foundations

Power is the ability to shape conduct, influence others, or bring about particular results. Authority is different: it exists where an institution claims a recognized entitlement to guide or direct people. Legitimacy concerns whether that claim is acceptable or capable of justification. For example, a military administration may control an area and enforce its instructions, yet still lack democratic support or a convincing moral basis.

Political theory commonly separates descriptive legitimacy from normative legitimacy. Descriptive legitimacy concerns the belief among members of society that a government has a rightful claim to rule. Normative legitimacy asks whether the government genuinely possesses a justified right to exercise authority. Weber's sociological work is especially useful for understanding the former, while social-contract theories and modern moral approaches address the latter (Weber, 1978; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2023). Legitimacy must also be distinguished from justice. A state might satisfy a minimum requirement for exercising authority even while some of its policies are unfair. For this reason, legality, public approval, and justice should be examined as related but separate questions.

Classical Foundations of State Legitimacy

Thomas Hobbes: Security and Sovereign Power

In Leviathan (1651), Thomas Hobbes presents a state of nature in which no common authority exists to enforce rules. Mutual suspicion, fear and insecurity

make lasting cooperation difficult. To escape this condition, individuals authorize sovereign power to maintain peace and safeguard their lives. In Hobbes's account, political authority is therefore strongly linked to the ability to prevent disorder. His argument rightly draws attention to security as a basic condition of social existence: rights and agreements cannot be reliably enjoyed when no institution is able to protect them.

The difficulty with this position is that it may permit power to become too concentrated. When the preservation of security is treated as the only important standard, people can be left without adequate safeguards against arbitrary rule. The central challenge is to maintain public order without allowing the state's protective role to become a source of domination.

John Locke: Consent, Individual Rights and Restricted Government

In Two Treatises of Government (1689/1690), John Locke maintains that people possess natural rights, particularly the rights to life, liberty and property, even before a government is established. They create a political society through consent so that these rights can receive more dependable protection. Government should therefore be understood as a responsibility held in trust, rather than as the unlimited property of a ruler. If those in power repeatedly act against the purpose for which authority was granted, their entitlement to obedience is undermined and resistance may become justified.

Locke's account makes political authority conditional upon consent and the protection of rights. Nevertheless, the idea of consent creates practical difficulties. Do people truly agree to the political system into which they are born, or do they simply have to live under an existing arrangement? Can remaining within a country be treated as a tacit agreement? Such questions expose the difference between freely choosing political membership in theory and experiencing citizenship in real life.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Sovereignty of the People

In The Social Contract (1762), Jean-Jacques Rousseau argues that rightful political authority must arise from collective self-government. People remain free when they follow laws that they have made for themselves as members of a political community. The general will is intended to represent the shared interest of the community, rather than the private advantages of influential groups. On this account, sovereignty belongs to the people.

Rousseau's theory gives citizens a central role in creating the laws that govern them. However, the language of the general will can be misused by leaders who claim to represent everyone while suppressing disagreement. A majority decision does not necessarily express the common good. A legitimate democratic

system must therefore preserve minority protections, political opposition, and individual freedoms.

Max Weber: Three Forms of Legitimate Authority

In Economy and Society (1922; English edition 1978), Max Weber identifies three ideal forms of authority. Traditional authority rests on established customs and inherited practices. Charismatic authority grows from people's devotion to a leader regarded as exceptional. Legal-rational authority is grounded in formal rules, offices, and procedures that apply impersonally. Modern bureaucratic states depend largely on this legal-rational form.

Weber's framework helps explain the reasons people accept political rule, but it is mainly descriptive and does not provide a complete moral judgement of a government. Public acceptance cannot, by itself, demonstrate that a regime is just. Propaganda, long-standing social hierarchies, or the influence of a charismatic figure may all generate obedience. Such acceptance may indicate political stability, but it does not conclusively establish legitimacy.

Modern and Contemporary Approaches

John Rawls: The Idea of Public Reason

John Rawls, particularly in Political Liberalism (1993), considers how political legitimacy can be maintained in societies characterized by reasonable pluralism. Citizens may follow different religious, ethical, and philosophical beliefs while still reaching agreement on fair principles for political life. Laws backed by coercive power should be defended through public reasons that people can examine and assess, rather than being imposed simply because the beliefs of one group have become dominant.

Rawls's approach gives importance to reciprocity and equal respect among citizens. Its practical weakness is that public discussion does not always take place on equal terms. Differences in wealth, education, and access to media can determine whose arguments receive attention and influence. Therefore, having a formal opportunity to participate does not necessarily mean that all citizens possess equal political influence.

Joseph Raz: Authority as a Service

In The Morality of Freedom (1986), Joseph Raz develops what is known as the service conception of authority. An authority is justified when following its instructions helps individuals act more successfully in accordance with reasons that already apply to them than they would if each person made every decision independently. Political authority should thus assist those who are subject to it, rather than simply require their obedience.

This idea is relevant to complicated societies in which people depend on specialized knowledge in areas such as public health, infrastructure, and technical regulation. However, professional expertise is not enough to justify

authority. Experts must operate within lawful powers, provide explanations for their decisions, and remain answerable to the public. Even a technically capable institution may act unjustly if it disregards rights or leaves affected communities out of the decision-making process.

Bernard Williams: The Basic Demand for Legitimation

Political realism, including the work of Bernard Williams, warns against viewing politics as nothing more than the application of ideal moral principles. In In the Beginning Was the Deed (2005), Williams argues that a state must meet a basic demand for legitimation: it has to explain why its use of coercive power is not merely another form of domination. Maintaining security and order is important, but the state must also give a defensible account of the way its power is arranged and exercised.

This perspective takes historical circumstances and institutional realities seriously. A theory that refuses to recognize any authority until perfect justice has been achieved may be impractical. At the same time, treating orders sufficiently can provide an excuse for oppression. The aim should be to establish standards that are sufficiently demanding while remaining relevant to actual political conditions.

Comparative Analysis

The thinkers considered above agree that political rule requires justification, although they identify different foundations for it. Hobbes gives priority to security and peace; Locke places emphasis on consent and natural rights; Rousseau focuses on collective self-rule; Weber explains the social beliefs that support authority; Rawls highlights fair cooperation and public reasoning; and Raz evaluates authority by asking whether it helps the people subject to it.

Thinker	Central basis	Main contribution	Key limitation
Hobbes	Security and peace	Shows why public order is needed	May permit excessive concentration of power
Locke	Consent and rights	Places limits on government	Genuine consent is difficult to establish
Rousseau	Popular sovereignty	Treats citizens as makers of law	Majorities may suppress minorities
Weber	Belief in forms of rule	Explains why authority is accepted	Acceptance is not proof of moral validity
Rawls	Public reason	Recognizes pluralism and equal respect	Political influence may remain unequal
Raz	Authority serving its subjects	Offers a practical test of authority	Expertise requires legal and public oversight

Taken together, these arguments indicate that legitimacy has several dimensions. Security without the protection of rights can lead to authoritarian rule. Consent given under unfair conditions may have little real meaning. Elections that are not restrained by law can allow majority domination, while public approval that is never morally examined can make injustice appear normal. A convincing account of legitimacy must therefore join capable public institutions with restrictions on power and genuine opportunities for citizens to challenge decisions.

Critical Discussion: What Makes a State Legitimate?

Lawfulness Is Essential, but It Is Not Enough

Constitutional provisions, independent courts and consistent procedures help prevent arbitrary government. Legal-rational authority clarifies which institutions are permitted to act, which processes they must follow, and how their decisions may be questioned. Even so, compliance with legal procedure cannot settle every question of legitimacy. An unfair law may be adopted through a process that is formally correct. The more fundamental standard is whether the legal order respects equal status, protects basic rights, and makes effective remedies available.

Consent Needs to Be Genuine and Ongoing

Consent is frequently presented as the foundation of democratic authority. In reality, citizens seldom enter into an express agreement accepting each individual law. Elections authorize representatives, but they occur at intervals and do not mean that voters support every policy adopted afterwards. Financial dependence, misleading information, intimidation, and unequal access to political resources can all weaken the quality of consent. It is better understood as a continuing practice supported by free elections, open discussion, trustworthy information, and the right to oppose government peacefully.

Government Performance and the Social Contract

People reasonably expect the state to maintain safety and provide education, healthcare, infrastructure, and impartial administration. When governments perform these duties effectively, public confidence may increase. Yet successful delivery of services cannot provide a secure foundation for legitimacy on its own. An administration might promote economic development while restricting civil freedoms. Good performance is important, but it cannot take the place of rights, accountability, and lawful restraints on public power.

Equality, Inclusion and Safeguards for Minorities

A government cannot convincingly claim to represent the entire population when certain communities are regularly excluded. Equal citizenship involves more than using identical language in legislation; it also requires fair opportunities to access public institutions and protection from discrimination. Majority rule is a method for reaching decisions, not a complete definition of justice. Constitutional protections and independent bodies are necessary to stop the state from serving only the interests of the most powerful section of society.

Coercive Power, Public Protest and Dissent

The modern state is commonly understood to hold a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force. The term 'legitimate', however, means that the use of force must be justified. Police and security powers should have a legal basis, remain proportionate to the situation, and be open to independent review. Peaceful protests also allow citizens to call public institutions to honor their constitutional responsibilities. When a government treats criticism as an act of disloyalty, it damages the trust that supports stable political authority.

Contemporary Challenges

New technologies create important questions for state legitimacy. Digital monitoring and artificial intelligence may make public services more effective, but decision-making systems that are difficult to understand can produce discriminatory outcomes without giving citizens a clear way to appeal. False information spread online can influence public opinion, while emotionally charged political campaigns may weaken careful public discussion. Climate change and public-health crises also demand collective responses and may require temporary limits on individual conduct. Such limits can be justified only when they rely on evidence, are proportionate, remain limited in duration, and are subject to proper oversight.

International interdependence creates further difficulty. Matters involving trade, migration, climate policy, and finance are often influenced by international organizations that are not directly controlled through national elections. Questions of legitimacy therefore arise when political decisions are made beyond the ordinary boundaries of national democratic accountability (Sadurski, Sevel and Walton, 2019).

In India, constitutional government, democratic representation, equality before the law, fundamental rights, judicial review and federalism offer important standards for judging public authority. Their value depends on whether they are applied consistently and whether citizens can obtain accessible remedies when those standards are violated.

Toward a Balanced Framework

The preceding discussion indicates that legitimacy should be judged through a set

of connected standards rather than by relying on one decisive test. Constitutional legality requires public institutions to act under established rules that can be examined and reviewed. Democratic authorization depends on free participation, genuine political competition, and the possibility of replacing those who govern. Protection of rights places limits the actions of even an elected majority. Public justification requires the government to offer reasons that recognize citizens as equals. Administrative capacity concerns the fair provision of essential public goods. Finally, accountability and correction require openness, independent supervision, and effective remedies when authority is misused.

These standards depend on one another. Elections without enforceable rights may lead to an elected form of authoritarianism. Constitutional guarantees may remain empty promises if independent institutions cannot enforce them. Efficient public administration without transparency can hide corruption. Public discussion conducted without reliable information can be manipulated. Legitimacy is therefore best viewed as an ongoing relationship: government must be capable of making and implementing decisions, while remaining sufficiently limited so that it does not dominate the people.

Critical Evaluation and Original Argument

One limitation of several traditional theories is their tendency to identify a single principal source of legitimate rule. Hobbes highlight security; Locke gives priority to consent and rights, and Rousseau places sovereignty in the hands of the people. Each perspective identifies an indispensable element, but none offers a complete standard for contemporary political systems. Security is necessary, yet it can be used to defend against repression. Consent is important, but inequality can distort it. Popular sovereignty is democratic in principle but appeals to the majority can be used to silence minority communities.

Weber adds an important insight by showing that political order depends not only on formal rules but also on the beliefs and habits through which people recognize authority. Nevertheless, social acceptance can exist alongside injustice. People may obey because they fear punishment, rely on public benefits or have come to see an unequal hierarchy as natural. Public trust should therefore be treated as significant evidence about political stability, rather than as the final moral test of a government.

This article advances a model of renewable legitimacy. A state does not secure legitimacy once and for all by being founded, winning an election or adopting a constitution. Its claim to rule

must be renewed through three continuing processes.

First, authorization requires citizens to take part in choosing institutions and influencing their decisions.

Second, justification requires governments to provide public reasons for coercive measures and to respect constitutional rights.

Third, correction requires citizens and independent institutions to identify, challenge and remedy abuses.

This approach brings together the consent-based tradition, Weber's account of public acceptance, Rawls's emphasis on public justification and Raz's view that authority should serve those subject to it.

The model also separates the capacity to govern from the entitlement to govern. Capacity refers to whether public institutions can carry out decisions; entitlement concerns whether they are justified in doing so. A state with limited capacity may fail to protect its citizens because it cannot act effectively. A powerful state may fail for the opposite reason: it exercises its strength without adequate restraints. Legitimate authority needs both sufficient institutional capacity and credible limits on its use. The important question is not merely 'Does the state govern?' but also 'Can it explain, defend and correct the manner in which it governs?'

In practical terms, governments should make the reasons behind major decisions public, provide access to government data, safeguard independent journalism, guarantee fair hearings, encourage participation at the local level and subject emergency powers to review. Citizens must be free to question public institutions without being labelled enemies of the state. A government does not strengthen its legitimacy by eliminating criticism; it strengthens legitimacy when it responds to criticism through lawful and fair procedures.

Conclusion

State legitimacy and political authority shape the basic relationship between citizens and government. Coercive power may secure obedience, but only authority supported by adequate justification can claim a rightful position in political society. Hobbes explains why security is essential; Locke grounds government in consent and individual rights; Rousseau links legitimate rule to popular sovereignty; Weber describes the social bases of accepted authority; Rawls emphasizes public reasoning; and Raz argues that authority should help those who are subject to it. Their different approaches demonstrate that legitimacy cannot be explained by force, custom, elections, legal form, or administrative performance in isolation.

A legitimate state preserves public order without sacrificing freedom, protects individual rights while making collective decisions possible, and exercises authority while remaining open to scrutiny. Its institutions must be

capable enough to fulfil public responsibilities and sufficiently restrained to prevent domination. The most convincing approach is therefore plural and dynamic. Legitimacy is continually sustained through democratic authorization, constitutional legality, equal citizenship, public justification, and effective procedures for correcting abuses. State authority is at its strongest not when citizens are unable to question it, but when they have sound reasons to regard its decisions as fair and justified.

References

- Barker, R. (1990). *Political legitimacy and the state*. Clarendon Press.
- Buchanan, A. (2004). *Justice, legitimacy, and self-determination: Moral foundations for international law*. Oxford University Press.
- Fossen, T. (2023). *Facing authority: A theory of political legitimacy*. Oxford University Press.
- Hobbes, T. (1991). *Leviathan* (R. Tuck, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1651)
- Levitov, A. (2016). Normative legitimacy and the state. In *The Oxford handbook of political philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- Locke, J. (1988). *Two treatises of government* (P. Laslett, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1689/1690)
- Rawls, J. (1993). *Political liberalism*. Columbia University Press.
- Raz, J. (1986). *The morality of freedom*. Clarendon Press.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1987). *On the social contract* (D. A. Cress, Trans.). Hackett Publishing. (Original work published 1762)
- Sadurski, W., Sevel, M., & Walton, K. (Eds.). (2019). *Legitimacy: The state and beyond*. Oxford University Press.
- Simmons, A. J. (2001). *Justification and legitimacy: Essays on rights and obligations*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2023, December 11). *Political legitimacy*. (Substantive revision)
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). University of California Press.
- Williams, B. (2005). *In the beginning was the deed: Realism and moralism in political argument*. Princeton University Press.