**Political Power and Legitimacy**

**3 What Makes a Government Powerful and Accepted?**

Political power means having the ability to create policy and influence the actions of others. But power alone isn't enough to maintain authority over time (i.e. the British Empire). Legitimacy is what makes power *enduring*. A government that is seen as legitimate is one that people recognize as having the right to rule, even if they disagree with its decisions.

Legitimacy can come from many sources: tradition (e.g., monarchies), law (e.g., constitutions), religion (theocracy), charisma (demagoguery), or performance (getting results). When people believe their government is legitimate, they are more likely to follow its laws, pay taxes, and participate in civic life. But when legitimacy breaks down, whether due to corruption, violence, or perceived unfairness, governments can face protests, instability, or even collapse.

**Key Terms and Definitions**

| **Term** | **Definition** |
| --- | --- |
| **Political Power** | The ability to influence the actions and decisions of others, especially in a political context. |
| **Authority** | The recognized and accepted use of power. |
| **Legitimacy** | The belief that a government or leader has the right to rule. |
| **Coercion** | The use of force or threats to make people obey. |
| **Consent of the Governed** | The idea that governments derive their authority from the approval of the people. |

**Active Learning Exercise: “Legit or Not?” Case Study Carousel**

**Orienting Question:**

*Why are some governments seen as more legitimate than others?*

**Objective:**

Students will apply their understanding of legitimacy by analyzing real and fictional government scenarios and deciding whether each government has legitimate power.

**Instructions:**

1. **Case Study Stations (20–25 minutes):**
   * Set up 4–6 stations around the room. At each station, place a short case study (you can print them or display digitally).
   * Each case study describes a different government (real or fictional) and how it maintains power (e.g., through elections, military control, religious authority, or effective leadership).
   * Sample case study themes:
     + A monarchy with centuries of tradition but no elections
     + A military dictatorship that provides free healthcare and education
     + A democratic republic with low voter turnout and high public cynicism
     + A revolutionary regime recently installed through violent protest
     + A theocracy where laws are based on religious doctrine
     + A failing democracy with regular elections but widespread corruption
2. **Student Tasks at Each Station:**
   * Read the scenario and answer these prompts:
     + *What kind of power does this government use (authority, coercion, consent)?*
     + *Would most citizens see this government as legitimate? Why or why not?*
     + *What could increase or weaken its legitimacy?*
3. **Class Discussion (10–15 minutes):**
   * After rotating through stations, debrief as a class.
   * Discuss:
     + Which cases had the strongest legitimacy?
     + Can a government be powerful without being legitimate? Vice-versa?
     + Which is more important: effectiveness or legitimacy?
     + Does power necessarily bring legitimacy?

**Review Questions**

1. What is the difference between power and legitimacy?
2. How does legitimacy benefit a government?
3. Give two examples of how a government might lose legitimacy.
4. Why might people obey a government they don’t like?
5. What is meant by the phrase “consent of the governed,” and how does it relate to democracy?

**Case Studies**

**Case Study 1: The Kingdom of Saturn**

The Kingdom of Veritas has been ruled by the same royal family for over 400 years. The king is not elected, and the people have no real say in government decisions. However, the monarchy is deeply tied to the nation’s history and culture. Most citizens feel a strong sense of pride in the royal family and believe the king has a duty to care for the people. The government provides few services, but the society is relatively peaceful.

**Case Study 2: The Republic of Jupiter**

Nova Terra holds regular elections every four years, and multiple political parties compete for power. However, turnout in the last election was only 38%, and many people believe the system is rigged in favor of the wealthy. Corruption scandals frequently make headlines, and public trust in government is low. Even though it’s technically a democracy, many citizens feel disconnected from political life.

**Case Study 3: The Federation of Venus**

Harmonia is a military-run state. The general who leads the country came to power in a coup and dissolved the national legislature. There are no elections. Despite this, the government provides free education and healthcare, keeps streets safe, and maintains low unemployment. Most citizens appreciate the stability, especially compared to the chaos of the previous democratic government.

**Case Study 4: The People’s Assembly of Mercury**

The People’s Assembly was formed after a massive revolution overthrew a corrupt dictatorship. The new government claims to represent “the will of the people,” but critics say it’s controlled by a small elite who silences dissent. The country is still unstable, with frequent protests and unrest. The leaders argue that legitimacy comes from their role in liberating the country, not from elections.

**Case Study 5: The Divine State of Mars**

Solara is a theocracy where the religious council holds supreme authority. Laws are based on sacred texts, and leaders are chosen by religious scholars, not voters. Citizens are required to follow strict moral codes. While some people believe this government is divinely legitimate, others, especially religious minorities, feel excluded and oppressed.

**Case Study 6: The United Provinces of Neptune**

Astra is a constitutional democracy with a strong record of upholding civil liberties and the rule of law. Elections are free and fair, and voter turnout is high. Citizens can petition the government, protest freely, and trust the courts to be impartial. While disagreements exist, most people accept election outcomes and believe in the legitimacy of the system.