

The Power to Rule

The power to rule can be gained—or lost—in many ways. In the 1100s B.C.E., the Shang dynasty ruled north central China. However, tough military campaigns against other nearby kingdoms eventually exhausted the Shang's fighting forces. In time, the neighboring Zhou, under a leader named Wu, took advantage of this weakness. From their lands to the west, the Zhou attacked and quickly overwhelmed the Shang defenses. The Shang ruler reportedly committed suicide, and Wu became his people's new ruler.

The history of China, like that of many countries, is filled with tales of the violent overthrow of one government after another. The history of the United States, on the other hand, reveals mostly peaceful transfers of power. Whether one looks at an ancient Chinese ruler or a modern American president, what they have in common is the power to rule. How they use that power, however, can vary greatly.

What Is Power, and How Is It Exercised?

Power is a difficult concept to define. People seem to know it when they see it, but they have a hard time pinning down exactly what it is. The sociologist Max Weber defined power as "the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behavior of other persons." In his book *Three Faces of Power*, economist Kenneth E. Boulding refers to power as "our capacity to get other people to do things that contribute to what we want."

That's about as simple as the concept gets. When scholars dig deeper into the sources, uses, and effects of power, the subject seems to expand in many different directions. There are five sources of power, ranging from persuasion to **coercion**, or the use of force. Governments throughout the ages have relied on each of these types of powers, often in combination.

Whatever its source, the power to rule can be used for positive or negative ends, or purposes. Through the centuries, some rulers have used their power to build cities, promote the arts, or feed the poor. Others have abused their power by looting their subjects' wealth, turning captives into slaves, and even committing mass murder.

In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine characterized British rule of the colonies as "a long and violent abuse of power." In his view, "a thirst for absolute power is the natural disease of monarchy." A century later, British historian Lord Acton echoed Paine's observations on the **abuse of power** when he wrote, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

How Does Power Relate to Authority?

People with the right to use power are said to have authority. But how do they get that authority? Sometimes it comes through tradition. For example, parents have authority over their children. Religious leaders have authority over their congregations.

In the field of government, political scientists speak of **formal authority**, or power that has been defined in some legal or other official way. People with formal authority have the legal right to use power. The source of their authority might be a constitution, a contract, or another legal document. School principals have formal authority, as do police officers and presidents.

What Gives a Ruler Legitimacy?

Leaders whose power and authority are accepted as valid by the people they govern are said to have **legitimacy**. Legitimacy rises and falls depending on the willingness of those being led to follow those doing

the leading. A military leader can seize power by force, as in the example of the Zhou leader, Wu. But to be considered a legitimate ruler, Wu had to convince the people he conquered of his right to govern them.

To enhance Wu's standing among the Shang, the Zhou introduced the **mandate of heaven**—a doctrine of legitimacy that would endure for more than 2,000 years. According to this doctrine, the Chinese ruler was the “son of heaven” and thus had authority over “all under heaven.” The ruler retained this right only so long as he ruled his subjects in a moral manner. If he failed to rule well, the mandate of heaven would pass to someone else. The Shang leader, they argued, had lost the mandate of heaven to Wu, who had been sent by heaven to unseat him.

In the 1500s, powerful European monarchs proclaimed a similar doctrine of legitimacy, known as the **divine right of kings**. This doctrine, like the mandate of heaven, held that monarchs represented God on Earth. Because their right to rule was divine, or God-given, monarchs did not have to answer to the people for their actions. God had granted them absolute power to govern as they saw fit.

Before long, some Europeans began to challenge this doctrine. The English philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke popularized what became known as the **social-contract theory** of government. According to this theory, the legitimacy of a government stems from an unwritten contract between the ruler and the ruled. Under the terms of this contract, the people agree to obey a ruler in exchange for the ruler's promise to protect their rights. A ruler who breaks this contract by abusing power loses legitimacy and should be removed from power.

Read the text and answer the questions. Do not rewrite the question; include it in your answer.

1. Define power. Discuss three ways you see power displayed on a daily basis.
2. What does Lord Acton mean when he wrote, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”?
3. How does power relate to authority?
4. How does a school principal have formal authority?
5. Provide two examples of how a leader's power can be considered legitimate.
6. Discuss the meaning of the social contract theory.