

Conflict as Legitimacy: A Modern Case for Machiavellianism

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Abstract. This paper reexamines the foundations of political legitimacy by shifting focus from virtue, justice, or consent to the management of conflict. Traditional theories, from Locke's consent-based social contract to Rawls's principles of justice, presume a level of agreement and trust that contemporary societies often lack. Drawing on Hobbes's account of the state of nature and modern theories of collective action, the paper argues that governments exist because conflict is inevitable and cooperation fragile. Their central function is to monopolize force and make collective action possible. Revisiting Machiavelli, the paper contends that legitimacy is not achieved by eliminating conflict but by institutionalizing it. Durable political order depends less on consensus than on the capacity of institutions to channel division into lawful, predictable, and stable forms.

Keywords: Political Legitimacy, Conflict, Machiavellianism, Consent Theory, State Formation

1. Introduction

Political legitimacy is among the most enduring questions in political philosophy. Governments rise and fall, sometimes despite their ability to secure material prosperity or deliver stability. Philosophers from antiquity to the present have debated the foundations of legitimate authority: whether it rests on the virtue of rulers, the consent of the governed, or the justice of institutions [1]. Yet history and contemporary politics alike raise a disquieting possibility: what if virtue, consent, and justice are not reliable in practice? What if governments persist even when citizens distrust their leaders, and even when institutions appear corrupt or dysfunctional?

In recent decades, citizens across the globe have grown increasingly distrustful of political leaders and institutions. Opinion surveys record historic declines in trust toward parliaments, courts, and executives, while voter turnout in many democracies falls steadily. As of 2024, only 22 percent of Americans indicated that they “trust the government in Washington to do what is right” [2]. Globally, the 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer reports widening “trust inequality,” with lower-income respondents far less trusting of institutions than higher-income peers, and six in ten people reporting moderate to high levels of grievance, believing that government and business primarily serve narrow interests [3]. These trust gaps feed perceptions of unfairness and make it harder for institutions to claim legitimacy on the basis of neutral stewardship.

Beyond trust, participation itself shows signs of strain. International IDEA reports that global voter turnout fell about 10 percentage points from 2008 (65.2%) to 2023 (55.5%), alongside the

striking fact that in one in five national elections, at least one losing candidate or party rejects the result – a direct challenge to the minimal procedural consensus democracies require [4]. Corruption scandals, populist upheavals, and widening inequality fuel a widespread sense that governments no longer serve the common good. In authoritarian regimes, legitimacy is often claimed on the basis of rapid economic growth or national security, yet these promises falter in the face of economic downturns or social unrest. Despite such crises of confidence, governments continue to exercise authority, and citizens, however reluctantly, continue to comply.

This tension exposes a profound paradox at the heart of modern politics. On the one hand, legitimacy is assumed to rest on moral authority, public trust, or shared principles of justice. On the other, the daily reality of politics is marked by division, cynicism, and conflict. Citizens rarely agree on what justice demands, and many do not consent to the decisions of their rulers, yet the machinery of the state carries on. The gap between political ideals and political practice raises a pressing question: if governments cannot rely on the virtue of rulers or the trust of citizens, what, if anything, secures their legitimacy?

Traditional political philosophy has often tied legitimacy to morality or the righteousness of rulers. Thinkers such as Aristotle and Cicero grounded the authority of government in virtue, wisdom, and the common good [1]. Later, Locke shifted the foundation to the consent of the governed [5], and Rawls built a more elaborate framework in which justice, rather than virtue, provided legitimacy. These approaches remain influential, yet they are strained in conditions of conflict, distrust, and polarization, where consensus cannot be assumed. Consent is fractured in polarized societies, where elections are bitterly contested and trust in procedures is low [6]. Justice, too, is contested: in pluralistic societies, no single conception commands universal agreement. In this context, the traditional accounts of legitimacy appear fragile, unable to explain how governments endure amid deep disagreement and suspicion.

Niccolò Machiavelli, writing in the early sixteenth century, offers a more unsettling but realistic account. For him, virtue was unreliable, and rulers should not depend on the moral excellence of citizens or leaders. Instead, legitimacy derived from the effectiveness of institutions in maintaining liberty and stability, particularly through the management of conflict [7]. As Machiavelli himself unapologetically puts it: “For it can be said about men in general that they are ungrateful, fickle, dissembling, hypocritical, cowardly, and greedy. As long as you treat them well, they are all yours” [8]. Machiavelli’s claim of conflict management being the driver of legitimacy provides a striking counterpoint to Locke’s emphasis on consent.

This paper argues that legitimacy in the modern world cannot be fully understood through consent or justice alone. Contemporary democracies, where trust is low and divisions run deep, remain legitimate not because they eliminate conflict but because they institutionalize it. By exploring the core of legitimacy – why governments exist, I will argue that conflict is not a threat to legitimacy but a resource for it. Legitimacy depends on a government’s capacity to structure disagreement into stable, predictable, and lawful forms. Revisiting Machiavelli’s perspective alongside opposing views such as Locke’s, this paper argues that legitimacy in modern democracies depends not only on consent or justice but also on the capacity of institutions to channel conflict into stable forms. Then, I will demonstrate the relevance of Machiavelli’s ideas to contemporary political debates, bringing his perspective back into modern discussions of state resilience.

2. Limitations of consensus models of legitimacy

Among the most influential modern accounts of political legitimacy is that advanced by John Locke. It represents traditions that view legitimacy as rooted in agreement, whether in the explicit form of

citizens' consent or in the hypothetical acceptance of fair principles. This model and similar ones continue to shape contemporary liberal democracies to this day. But when closely examined, one could spot the inconsistencies and drawbacks of consensus-based theories when applied to societies riven by distrust and conflict.

In Locke's Second Treatise of Government, the legitimacy of political authority originates in the consent of the governed [5]. Human beings in the state of nature possess natural rights to life, liberty, and property. Government is created through a social contract in which individuals delegate some of their natural freedom in order to secure impartial enforcement of these rights:

"Because no political society can be, nor subsist, without having in itself the power to preserve the property, and in order thereunto punish the offences of all those of that society, there, and there only, is political society where every one of the members hath quitted this natural power, resigned it up into the hands of the community in all cases that exclude him not from appealing for protection to the law established by it. And thus all private judgment of every particular member being excluded, the community comes to be umpire... ." [5]

Locke identifies the transfer of judgment from the individual to the community as the defining act that constitutes political society. In the state of nature, every person holds the natural right to interpret and enforce the law of nature. Yet because private judgment is partial and often self-serving, it breeds conflict and instability. Political society emerges when individuals collectively resign this natural power and place it under the authority of laws and officials authorized by the whole. In this way, the community becomes the common arbiter, empowered to resolve disputes and to punish offenses according to impartial and established rules.

Locke's central claim is that the legitimacy of government rests upon consent. Individuals restrict their natural freedom not out of divine command or coercion, but in order to secure the impartial protection of their lives, liberties, and estates. Consensus is thus the principle that binds members into a political body and grants authority to its institutions. The state is not absolute, but fiduciary: it exists to serve the purpose for which it was established, namely the preservation of property in its broad sense [6]. If it fails in this duty, its claim to obedience is dissolved, since the foundation of political society is the voluntary agreement of its members.

Locke's theory provides the foundation for many modern constitutional democracies. Electoral participation, representative institutions, and checks on executive power are all designed to ensure that government remains anchored in the consent of citizens. Yet Locke's account also faces difficulties in contemporary settings. Consent in practice is often ambiguous: low voter turnout, disillusionment with parties, and distrust in institutions raise the question of whether governments truly reflect the will of the governed. In essence, consent-derived legitimacy is challenged because explicit consent is rarely given:

"I might stay put because I'm unwilling to forsake those parts of my life. Subjection to the government, much as I dislike or even detest it, might be something I'm grudgingly willing to put up with as the onerous price tag attached to staying. Is that grudging willingness enough to count as consent?

I might stay put because I'm simply too poor to leave or because the government makes it illegal to emigrate. I might stay put because I have obligations to support my family members: maybe they're unwilling to leave with me or maybe I'm worried about finding a new job once I relocate. More provocatively, I may be so rooted in my community that it never occurs to me that I might go somewhere else. ... [9]"

Moreover, Locke's reliance on rational actors presumes a level of civic trust and shared norms that polarized societies often lack. Consent is rarely clear, often more tacit than explicit, and in many

cases indistinguishable from reluctant submission. In deeply polarized or distrustful societies, the assumption that citizens willingly authorize their governments becomes tenuous at best. These tensions reveal both the aspirational strength and the practical fragility of Locke's model, highlighting the need to consider alternative accounts of legitimacy that do not depend so heavily on consensus.

3. The core of legitimacy: why governments exist

Thus far, this paper has addressed why one of the widely recognized theories for political legitimacy can be contested, both through the examination of contemporary social phenomena and through understanding the theoretical debate concerning it. This leads to the natural question: what actually fosters legitimacy in these distrusted institutions? In order to understand what critically creates legitimacy in governing bodies, there is no better place to look than how these institutions came to be in the first place.

In this section, I will explore why governments exist using the following reasoning. First, that it is difficult for humans to cooperate under a natural condition. Second, humans need to cooperate, or in other words, have a demand for collective action. Thus, there is a need for the existence of an institution that is able to monopolize force and drive collective action [10].

To begin, human beings rarely cooperate reliably under a natural condition. Information is imperfect, interests diverge, and trust is fragile. In small groups, informal norms may restrain opportunism, but as scale and heterogeneity grow, the temptation to defect rises while the ability to punish weakens. Classic accounts describe this condition as one in which there is no common judge and no credible enforcement, so promises are cheap and threats are frequent. As Hobbes reasons, people are constantly violent under a natural condition. As people are self-interested, their interests will inevitably conflict with one another.

“From this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our Ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which neverthesse they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their End, (which is principally their owne conservation, and sometimes their delectation only,) endeavour to destroy, or subdue one another.” [11]

Hobbes identified that desire, defense, and glory are all drivers of violent and uncooperative behavior. This will lead to humanity to be infinitely in conflict with each other under a natural condition, endangering each other's security and diminishing the possibility for collective actions.

Yet humans must cooperate. Material prosperity depends on division of labor, exchange, and long horizons; survival depends on shared defense and risk-pooling. Many goods are non-excludable or networked – security, roads, standards, clean air – so each individual prefers to free-ride if others contribute. Without some mechanism to solve free-riding and coordination problems, societies leave gains from trade unrealized and remain vulnerable to predation [12].

From these premises, the need for a specialized institution follows. To make cooperation stable, there must exist a durable arbiter with the capacity to set rules, lower transaction costs, and enforce compliance. In modern terms, government is the organization that claims the monopoly of legitimate coercion over a territory and uses it to make agreements credible [10]. By centralizing enforcement of factors such as taxation, adjudication, and policing, government turns private bargains into public commitments and transforms fragile coordination into routine order.

The relationship between conflict and government is not accidental but constitutive. Where violence is decentralized, many actors fight and tax at cross-purposes; where force is monopolized, predation becomes predictable taxation and long-term investment becomes possible. In one influential model, the “stationary bandit” restrains short-term plunder in order to grow the tax base,

thereby creating incentives to supply order and public goods [13]. External warfare pushes in the same direction: rulers who must mobilize resources for war build bureaucracies, standardize law, and expand fiscal capacity; in doing so they consolidate the institutions known as the state.

Alternative, non-state arrangements can sometimes emerge: merchant guilds, reputational networks, community-based resource regimes. But these depend on dense reciprocity, repeated interaction, or external enforcement they do not fully control. As populations grow and interactions become impersonal, the limits of private ordering appear, and a public authority that can write general rules and impose credible sanctions becomes necessary for cooperation at scale.

Thus, governments exist, simply, because conflict exists and cooperation is hard. They endure not by eliminating conflict, but by organizing it – by converting raw power into rule-bound authority and channeling private interest toward public outcomes. The state's claim to legitimacy, on this view, rests first on performance in these tasks: the reliable provision of order, the enforcement of agreements, and the enabling of collective action under conditions where trust alone will not suffice.

4. Machiavelli: legitimacy through effectiveness and conflict

The discussion of why governments exist has shown that institutions emerge because conflict is pervasive and cooperation is difficult. Hobbes stressed that without a common authority, individuals fall into cycles of violence, while collective action theorists emphasize the ever-present temptation to free-ride. Machiavelli begins from a similar anthropology, but he pushes the logic further: conflict is not only the reason government must exist, it is also the very material from which legitimacy is fashioned.

Machiavelli accepts, like Hobbes, that people are fundamentally self-interested and prone to division. He departs, however, from the assumption that government's task is to suppress conflict entirely. In *The Prince*, he insists that rulers who expect virtue from their subjects are courting ruin; power can only be secured by mastering necessity and by wielding force when required:

“Since there is so great a discrepancy between how one lives and how one ought to live, whoever forsakes what is done for what ought to be done is learning self-destruction, not self-preservation. Hence a prince who wishes to retain his power must learn not to be good, and to use, or not to use, that ability according to necessity.” [8]

This claim aligns with the reasoning of the previous section. Just as governments exist because no one can rely on voluntary cooperation alone, Machiavelli argues that rulers cannot rely on the good will or virtue of their citizens. Authority is preserved when institutions discipline conflict, converting individual ambition into collective stability.

The *Discourses on Livy* illustrates this point by celebrating the “tumults” between plebeians and patricians in the Roman Republic [7]. It argues that the Roman Republic was preserved precisely because of the recurring struggles between the plebs and the senate. Where Locke saw legitimacy in the consensual transfer of judgment, Machiavelli saw it in institutional arrangements that forced rival classes to channel their antagonism into law. Conflict, in other words, was not a failure of legitimacy but its foundation.

These “tumults,” which many works had condemned, produced institutions such as the tribunes that secured the people against domination by the elites. Conflict, in other words, was not a sign of weakness but a source of strength. In Machiavelli's words, “if the tumults were the cause of the creation of the tribunes, they deserve highest praise; for besides giving popular administration its part, they were constituted as a guard of Roman freedom” [7].

This emphasis on conflict distinguishes Machiavelli sharply from the humanist tradition of his own time, which celebrated harmony and civic virtue as the foundations of republican freedom.

Unlike Leonardo Bruni or Francesco Guicciardini, Machiavelli rejected the idea that liberty could be sustained by education or moral excellence. Instead, he grounded legitimacy in institutions that compelled citizens to channel their ambition toward public ends, regardless of their character [14].

This insight fits squarely with the collective-action account of government. Just as modern political economy describes states as the monopolizers of force that make cooperation credible, Machiavelli portrays governments as durable precisely when they structure dissent. His republican vision suggests that institutions which absorb and redirect conflict – courts, legislatures, offices of representation – are the true anchors of legitimacy, more so than moral virtue or notional consent.

For modern politics, this is a sobering but clarifying lesson. Contemporary democracies endure not because citizens agree on principles of justice or consistently trust their rulers, but because institutions channel polarization, protest, and competition into predictable and lawful forms. Machiavelli thus offers a bridge between the classic problem of human conflict and the modern crisis of legitimacy: governments remain legitimate so long as they transform raw contestation into stable, rule-bound order.

5. Conclusion

Across the traditions of Locke, Hobbes, and Machiavelli, one theme consistently emerges: political life begins with conflict. Hobbes underscored that in the absence of authority, human beings fall into violent competition. Locke sought to replace violence with consent, but his account falters in societies where consensus is fractured or absent. Collective-action theorists have shown that voluntary cooperation is fragile without credible enforcement. Machiavelli, more starkly, teaches that governments are legitimate not because they overcome conflict, but because they organize it into law and institutions.

The implication is that legitimacy cannot rest securely on virtue, trust, or consensus. These are fragile and often absent in modern politics. What endures is the state's capacity to transform conflict into stable order, to enforce cooperation, and to channel ambition into predictable institutions. Legitimacy, in short, is less about harmony than about effectiveness and durability under conditions of division. Governments remain legitimate when they succeed in this task: when they can convert raw contestation into a framework of rules and power that citizens, however reluctantly, continue to obey.

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