Chapter: Concept of Polity

A. UNDERSTANDING POLITY

Introduction:

Polity refers both to the political organisation of a State and to the study of its institutions, processes and functioning. It explains how public authority is organised, how government operates, how rights are protected and how citizens participate in governance.

Why Study Polity?

It connects the Constitution with the actual exercise of public power: who makes laws, how governments are formed, how powers are distributed, how institutions remain accountable and how citizens participate.

POLITY AS A POLITICAL SYSTEM	POLITY AS A SUBJECT OF STUDY
Political organisation and working of the State; e.g., India's parliamentary and federal arrangements.	Systematic examination of the State, Constitution, institutions, elections, political processes and governance.

Scope of Polity

AREA	WHAT IT COVERS
State	Nature, elements, origin and authority of the State
Government	Organs, functions, forms and systems of government
Constitution	Structure, philosophy, amendments and interpretation
Institutions	Legislature, executive, judiciary; constitutional and statutory bodies
Political processes	Elections, representation, political parties and participation
Rights and governance	Fundamental Rights, duties, federalism, local government and welfare

CONCEPTUAL FLOW

STATE → CONSTITUTION → GOVERNMENT AND INSTITUTIONS → POLITICAL PROCESSES → RIGHTS, ACCOUNTABILITY AND GOVERNANCE

Illustration:

Parliament enacts laws, the executive implements them, courts may examine their constitutionality, and elections determine representation. Polity studies these connected processes within a constitutional system.

KEY IDEA: Polity is broader than the constitutional text: it includes institutions, political processes and their practical functioning.

B. POLITY AS A FORM OF GOVERNMENT: CLASSIFICATIONS

Political systems may be classified by different criteria: the source and exercise of authority, selection of the head of State, or territorial distribution of power. Categories can coexist in the same country.

BASIS	FORM	CENTRAL FEATURE
Political authority	Democracy	Authority based on participation and consent of the people

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BASIS	FORM	CENTRAL FEATURE
Head of State	Monarchy	A monarch, ordinarily succeeding hereditarily
Head of State	Republic	A non-hereditary head of State selected by an electoral or constitutional process
Territorial power	Federal	Constitutional distribution between central and regional governments
Territorial power	Unitary	Ultimate constitutional authority concentrated centrally
Other patterns	Aristocracy / oligarchy / theocracy / totalitarianism	Differ by who rules, source of authority or degree of control

1. Democratic Polity

Political authority rests on people's participation and consent, directly or through elected representatives. Features include periodic elections, representative institutions, participation, accountability and protection of rights and freedoms. In India, citizens elect the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies; governments face legislative and electoral accountability.

2. Monarchical Polity

A monarch, generally hereditary, serves as head of State. In an absolute monarchy (e.g., Saudi Arabia), the monarch exercises extensive authority; in a constitutional monarchy (e.g., the United Kingdom or Japan), constitutional arrangements limit the monarch's governing role. The UK is both a monarchy and a parliamentary democracy.

3. Republic

A republic has a non-hereditary head of State chosen directly, indirectly or by another constitutional process. India and the United States have elected Presidents. A republic is not necessarily democratic: republicanism concerns the head of State, whereas democracy concerns participation, legitimacy and accountability. India is both; the UK is democratic but not republican.

4. Federal Polity

Constitutional powers are divided between central and regional governments, each with recognised spheres of authority. India and the United States are examples, though their federal arrangements differ. In India, Parliament and State Legislatures legislate within constitutionally assigned fields.

5. Unitary Polity

Ultimate constitutional authority lies at the central level; regional institutions may exercise devolved or decentralised powers. The UK and France are commonly described as unitary States. The distinction from federalism is whether regional powers are constitutionally protected against unilateral central alteration.

6. Other Forms of Polity

FORM	MEANING / EXAMPLE
Aristocracy	Rule by a privileged or supposedly superior class; historical aristocratic systems
Oligarchy	Political power concentrated in a narrow elite
Theocracy	Political authority closely linked to religion or religious law; Iran has theocratic features
Totalitarianism	Extensive political and social control with little independent opposition; Nazi Germany

KEY IDEA: These classifications describe different dimensions and may overlap; actual political systems may combine characteristics.

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C. POLITY AS A SUBJECT OF STUDY

As a field of study, polity examines the State, government, Constitution, institutions, elections, representation, rights and governance. It studies not only legal provisions but also how institutions function: formation of governments, parliamentary scrutiny, electoral administration, judicial protection of rights and implementation of public policy.

Illustration:

Understanding the Election Commission requires both its constitutional position and the electoral process it supervises.

D. POLITY IN THE INDIAN CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The Constitution of India establishes the structure of the State, creates institutions, distributes powers and defines relations between the State and citizens. It is the central organising framework of Indian polity.

DIMENSION	CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS	SIGNIFICANCE
Nature of the State	Preamble; Article 1	Constitutional ideals and republican character; India as a Union of States
Union and State governments	Parts V and VI	Framework for government, legislatures and executives
Legislative powers	Articles 245–246; Seventh Schedule	Distribution of legislative authority
Judiciary	Articles 124 onwards; 214 onwards	Supreme Court and High Courts
Elections	Part XV; Articles 324–329	Electoral administration and representation
Rights and duties	Parts III, IV and IVA	Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles and Fundamental Duties
Local governance	Parts IX and IXA	Panchayats and Municipalities

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Illustration:

How These Dimensions Work Together

Suppose a State Legislature passes a law within its legislative field. Its authority derives from the Constitution; the executive implements the law; affected citizens may invoke Fundamental Rights; and constitutional courts may review validity. This connects federalism, legislative powers, executive action, rights and judicial review.

KEY IDEA: Polity explains how constitutional institutions and principles interact in the exercise of public power.

E. KEY TAKEAWAYS — QUICK REVISION

KEY DIMENSION	QUICK REVISION
Meaning and scope	Political organisation and its study; State, government, Constitution, institutions, processes and governance
Democracy	Authority based on popular participation and consent
Monarchy / Republic	Hereditary monarch / non-hereditary head of State
Federal / Unitary	Constitutionally distributed powers / ultimate authority at centre
Other forms	Aristocracy, oligarchy, theocracy and totalitarianism

KEY DIMENSION	QUICK REVISION
Important distinction	Different criteria can coexist: India is democratic, republican and federal
Indian framework	Constitution structures institutions, allocates powers, protects rights and regulates governance

F. UPSC PRELIMS PRACTICE QUESTION

With reference to "Polity", consider the following statements:

1. Polity is confined to the study of the constitutional text of a country.
2. Polity includes the analysis of the structure, processes and functioning of political institutions.
3. The form of government (e.g., democracy, monarchy, republic) forms a part of the study of polity.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 only
(b) 1 and 2 only
(c) 2 and 3 only
(d) 1, 2 and 3

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