

Ethical Reciprocity and Political Legitimacy: A Relational Theory of Individuals, Society, and Political Institutions

Dr. Sujit Narayan Chattopadhyay¹, Sujit Narayan Chattopadhyay²

^{1,2}Ex-Professor, Public Administration, Netaji Subhas Open University

Abstract

Political legitimacy is commonly examined through institutional authorisation, procedural validity, and governmental performance. Yet these approaches do not fully explain how the ethical relations connecting individuals, society, and political institutions sustain or erode legitimacy. This article develops a relational theory of political legitimacy centred on **ethical reciprocity**, understood as the reciprocal recognition of obligations among these actors under conditions of unequal power. It argues that legitimacy is not a fixed attribute of institutions but an ongoing relational achievement shaped by how political power is exercised and how responsibilities are acknowledged, fulfilled, and contested. The article distinguishes reciprocity from symmetrical exchange, showing how persistent inequalities in the distribution of obligations and the absence of institutional responsiveness can produce ethical asymmetry and weaken legitimacy. By connecting individual ethical agency, social expectations, institutional conduct, and political power, the article explains how legitimacy may be reproduced, eroded, or repaired. Ethical reciprocity thus provides a relational account of legitimacy grounded in differentiated responsibility and reciprocal accountability.

Keywords: Ethical reciprocity; political legitimacy; political ethics; relational theory; differentiated responsibility; institutional accountability; political authority; democratic governance

Section: I.

Introduction

Political legitimacy is commonly examined through institutional authorization, procedural validity, public justification, or governmental performance. These approaches illuminate important dimensions of legitimate authority, but they do not by themselves fully explain how the relationships connecting individuals, society, and political institutions sustain or erode legitimacy over time. The central problem is not simply why political authority is authorized or accepted, but how the exercise of power remains ethically connected to those subject to it. This article addresses that problem by developing a relational theory of political legitimacy centred on **ethical reciprocity**.

Ethical reciprocity refers to the reciprocal recognition and performance of obligations among political actors whose capacities, positions, and powers are unequal but mutually consequential. It is not a principle of symmetrical exchange, equivalent contribution, or contractual give-and-take. Political relationships are rarely relationships among equals in their capacity to make rules, allocate resources, impose obligations, or determine the conditions under which others act. Ethical reciprocity instead requires that differences in power be accompanied by appropriately differentiated responsibilities. Individuals have obligations

towards others and the political community, while institutions exercising public authority bear responsibilities towards those whose lives and conduct their decisions affect. The relevant ethical question is therefore not whether power and obligation are distributed identically, but whether the exercise of power remains answerable to reciprocal obligations.

The central argument is that **political legitimacy is not merely a property possessed by political institutions; it is an ongoing relational achievement sustained through ethical reciprocity among individuals, society, and political institutions**. Legal authorization, procedural validity, and effective performance remain important, but their presence does not necessarily settle whether authority is ethically sustained. Individuals are not simply passive recipients of institutional decisions: through compliance, participation, criticism, and resistance, they contribute to the reproduction or contestation of political relationships. Society constitutes the mediating sphere in which social expectations, shared norms, collective judgments, and institutional practices interact. Legitimacy consequently depends on relationships among these domains rather than on any single institutional attribute.

This relational argument also requires distinguishing political asymmetry from ethical failure ⁽³⁾. Institutions necessarily possess powers that individual citizens do not, and unequal power does not by itself render authority illegitimate. The problem arises when the responsibilities accompanying the exercise of power are persistently neglected, displaced, or denied. When institutions demand compliance without adequate accountability, impose public obligations while evading their own responsibilities, or disregard the claims of those affected by their decisions, an **ethical asymmetry** develops. Such asymmetry may weaken trust, intensify alienation, and encourage resistance; where it persists, it can undermine the legitimacy of political authority. Conversely, responsiveness, accountability, and recognition can help sustain or repair political relationships, although none guarantees legitimacy independently of wider political and institutional conditions.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in connecting questions that are often examined through distinct analytical lenses. Accounts of legitimacy have addressed the grounds on which power is justified, the procedures through which collective decisions are authorized, and the conditions under which political obligations arise. Other approaches have illuminated recognition, domination, and the operation of power ^{(1) (2)} The present argument does not assume that these traditions disregard ethical relations. Rather, it asks whether their insights can be connected through a more explicit account of how unequal political power generates differentiated responsibilities, how those responsibilities are enacted or neglected, and how their fulfilment or failure affects the durability of legitimacy. The explanatory focus thus shifts from the isolated moral character of individuals or the formal attributes of institutions to the **relational circuit connecting individual agency, social expectations, institutional responsibility, and political power**.

The argument makes three connected contributions. First, it conceptualizes ethical reciprocity as a relational principle rather than a form of symmetrical exchange. This allows obligations to be understood in light of differences in power and institutional position. Second, it treats legitimacy as a dynamic political relationship that may be sustained, contested, weakened, or repaired through the conduct of individuals, social groups, and institutions. Third, it connects the exercise of power to differentiated responsibility by arguing that greater institutional capacity to shape the lives of others strengthens the need for responsiveness and accountability. Together, these claims provide a framework for examining why formally authorized authority may nevertheless become politically fragile, and why changes in institutional conduct and relationships may contribute to the restoration of legitimacy without necessarily altering the formal structure of government.

The argument proceeds in five further sections followed by a conclusion. Section II establishes the theoretical foundations of ethical reciprocity and political legitimacy in relation to existing accounts of authorization, justification, political obligation, recognition, and power. Section III develops the relational mechanism connecting individuals, social norms, and political institutions. Section IV examines how ethical reciprocity operates through recognition, differentiated responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability. Section V considers unequal power, political obligation, and the emergence of ethical asymmetry. Section VI examines the institutional and normative implications of the argument, including the conditions and limits of reciprocity as an account of legitimacy. The conclusion summarizes the theoretical contribution and its implications for the study of political authority.

The article ultimately advances a qualified but consequential proposition: **political legitimacy is more likely to endure when the exercise of political power remains embedded in relationships of reciprocal ethical obligation, and it becomes vulnerable when those relationships are persistently displaced by unilateral authority or institutional irresponsibility.** Ethical reciprocity does not provide a complete theory of justice, nor does it imply that every political disagreement can be resolved through mutual recognition. Its contribution is more specific: it explains why the ethical quality of relationships among individuals, society, and political institutions matters to the maintenance, erosion, and possible repair of political legitimacy ⁽⁴⁾.

Section: II.

Theoretical Foundations: Ethics, Reciprocity, and Political Legitimacy

Political legitimacy is commonly examined through authorization, legality, consent, justification, justice, recognition, or the capacity of institutions to secure compliance. Each approach identifies an important dimension of legitimate authority, but none of these dimensions alone fully explains how authority is sustained, experienced, contested, and revised through relationships over time. An institution may be constitutionally authorized and procedurally valid while becoming persistently unresponsive to those subject to its decisions. Conversely, disagreement, institutional error, or the rejection of particular demands need not destroy legitimacy when authority remains capable of justification, accountability, and correction. Legitimacy must therefore be examined not only in terms of the grounds on which authority is established, but also through the ethical quality of the relationships in which it is exercised.

This argument engages established traditions without seeking to replace them. Weber's analysis of legitimate domination directs attention to the grounds on which authority is regarded as valid, while Beetham examines the normative and social conditions under which power is legitimated. [1] Rawls connects political legitimacy to public justification under conditions of reasonable pluralism, while Habermas emphasizes democratic procedures of justification and communicative will-formation. [2] Raz's account of authority and political obligation, Simmons's analysis of political obligation, and Fabienne Peter's work on democratic legitimacy illuminate further questions concerning the authority of political institutions and the justification of collective decisions. [3] These approaches provide indispensable resources for understanding political legitimacy. The present article develops a complementary question: how do relationships between those who exercise political power and those subject to it affect the continuing ethical standing of authority?

The answer proposed is **ethical reciprocity**. Reciprocity here does not mean exchange, equivalent return, or symmetrical obligation. Political relationships are reciprocal when they generate mutually intelligible expectations of conduct among differently situated actors. Yet reciprocity is not necessarily ethical merely

because actors depend upon one another or exchange benefits. Relationships of domination may involve mutual dependence without recognizing the equal political standing of those affected. Ethical reciprocity therefore requires relationships in which recognition, responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability constrain the exercise of unequal power. [4]

Recognition concerns the standing of persons and groups as participants in political life. It requires that they not be treated merely as objects of administration or instruments of institutional purposes. Responsibility concerns the obligations arising from relationships of power and dependence. Political authority generates particular responsibilities because institutional decisions can substantially affect the rights, opportunities, interests, and standing of those subject to them. Responsiveness concerns the capacity and willingness of institutions to hear, consider, and appropriately address legitimate claims. Accountability requires those exercising authority to explain and defend their decisions and, where warranted, to correct them. These dimensions are interdependent: recognition without responsiveness can remain symbolic; responsibility without accountability can become paternalistic; and responsiveness without recognition can become selective or instrumental.

This framework requires a relational understanding of power. Political power is not simply a resource possessed by an actor; it is exercised through relationships and affects the capacities of others to shape the conditions under which they live. Foucault's analysis of power as relational and dispersed, and Lukes's account of its less visible dimensions, help illuminate why power cannot be assessed solely through formal authority or observable decisions. [5] The present argument does not adopt either account wholesale. Rather, it develops the narrower proposition that the ethical standing of political authority cannot be assessed independently of the unequal capacities through which power is exercised and the responsibilities associated with those capacities.

Political relationships are therefore rarely symmetrical. Governments possess coercive and administrative capacities unavailable to individual citizens; social groups differ in resources and influence; and political leaders exercise authority that creates responsibilities not equally shared by those governed. Reciprocity cannot consequently require identical contributions or equivalent returns. It requires an ethically defensible relationship between power and responsibility. The greater an actor's capacity to shape the political standing and conditions of others, the stronger the corresponding responsibility to justify, constrain, and remain answerable for the exercise of that capacity. This is a principle of differentiated responsibility, not a claim that power automatically confers moral authority.

This distinction separates differentiated reciprocity from both strict symmetry and paternalism. Inequality of role does not necessarily imply inequality of political standing. A democratic government may legitimately possess greater coercive power than an individual citizen because it bears distinctive responsibilities for protecting rights, maintaining public institutions, and responding to collective needs. Unequal forms of protection or assistance may also be justified when necessary to secure equal political standing. The normative question is therefore not whether political relationships are symmetrical, but whether their asymmetries can be justified by differentiated responsibilities and remain constrained by recognition, responsiveness, and accountability. The concern with protection against arbitrary domination provides a related normative consideration, although non-domination and ethical reciprocity should not be treated as identical concepts. [6]

This distinction also permits a separation between **legitimate asymmetry** and **ethical asymmetry**. Legitimate asymmetry arises from differentiated roles, capacities, or responsibilities and remains subject to normative constraints. Ethical asymmetry emerges when differences in power become persistently one-

sided: institutions demand compliance without adequate responsiveness; powerful actors exercise authority without accountability; or individuals and groups are expected to bear political burdens while their legitimate claims are systematically disregarded. The problem is not asymmetry itself but the transformation of asymmetrical power into a relationship in which obligations flow predominantly in one direction. This distinction is an analytical proposition developed by the present article, rather than a terminology that should be attributed wholesale to the theorists discussed above.

Ethical reciprocity should nevertheless not be mistaken for a complete theory of justice. It establishes a normative threshold for legitimate political relationships rather than determining the entire substantive content of legitimacy. Its minimum requirements are recognition of equal moral and political standing, responsibility proportionate to power and position, meaningful responsiveness, accountability, and protection against arbitrary domination. Questions concerning the distribution of resources, the content of rights, constitutional design, democratic authorization, and competing conceptions of justice require additional principles. Ethical reciprocity contributes to their evaluation by directing attention to the relationships through which political decisions are made and their consequences experienced, but it cannot independently settle every substantive dispute.

Nor does ethical reciprocity entail unconditional responsiveness. Political claims can conflict, and institutions may have legitimate reasons to refuse particular demands. Majorities may advance claims that threaten minority rights; citizens may demand policies inconsistent with equal political standing; and institutions may confront obligations that cannot all be satisfied simultaneously. Ethical reciprocity therefore requires justified responsiveness rather than automatic compliance. A claim may legitimately be rejected when the refusal is publicly defensible, proportionate, non-arbitrary, accountable, and open to contestation and correction. Reciprocity thus concerns the ethical quality of the decision-making relationship, not a guarantee that every claimant will receive the outcome sought.

The same qualification applies to coercion. Political authority necessarily involves coercive capacities, and legitimacy cannot depend upon eliminating coercion altogether. The relevant question is whether coercive power remains constrained by public justification, proportionality, equal political standing, and accountability. Coercion becomes ethically deficient when it is arbitrary, exclusionary, unaccountable, or persistently unresponsive to those affected by its exercise. These considerations connect the relational argument to wider debates about political authority and freedom without reducing legitimacy to the absence of coercion.

These arguments lead to a relational conception of legitimacy. Legitimacy is neither simply a property possessed by institutions nor merely a judgment formed by citizens at a particular moment. It is a continuing achievement sustained through patterns of recognition, differentiated responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability. This conception does not displace authorization, justification, justice, or democratic procedure. Rather, it identifies the relational dimension through which these principles acquire practical significance: authorization establishes a basis for authority; justification provides reasons for its exercise; justice supplies substantive constraints; and ethical reciprocity concerns the relationships through which authority is exercised, assessed, and experienced.

The argument consequently treats individuals, society, and political institutions as mutually constitutive rather than as separate levels subsequently connected to one another. Individuals formulate claims, assume responsibilities, contest norms, and exercise political agency. Social relations generate and transform expectations concerning recognition and reciprocity. Institutions formalize and enforce particular patterns of these relationships through law, administration, representation, and coercion. Institutional decisions, in

turn, reshape social expectations and individual understandings of political membership. Legitimacy is thus produced within a dynamic relational field rather than located exclusively in any one actor or institutional level.

The theoretical foundation established here leads to the central proposition of the article: political legitimacy is a relational achievement sustained when asymmetrical political power remains embedded in ethically reciprocal relationships. The next section specifies the relational architecture through which power generates differentiated responsibility and through which responsibility is translated into responsiveness, recognition, and accountable authority.

Section: III.

The Relational Structure of Ethical Reciprocity

Ethical reciprocity becomes theoretically distinctive when understood not simply as a norm of individual conduct but as a relational mechanism connecting political power, differentiated responsibility, responsiveness, accountability, recognition, and legitimacy. Political institutions possess capacities to make binding decisions, allocate resources, regulate conduct, and authorise coercion that individual citizens ordinarily lack. These asymmetries generate responsibilities that vary with an actor's power and institutional position. Legitimacy is more likely to be sustained when those responsibilities remain answerable to the claims of persons affected by political decisions; persistent failures of responsiveness and accountability, by contrast, can weaken recognition and undermine legitimacy.

The proposed mechanism can be represented as follows:

Power asymmetry → Differentiated responsibility → Responsiveness and accountability → Recognition → Reciprocal legitimacy

This sequence identifies an explanatory relationship, not an automatic or strictly linear causal process. Its elements interact recursively. The exercise of power generates responsibilities, while the discharge of those responsibilities influences whether authority is experienced as responsive and accountable. Responsiveness can affirm recognition, and recognition can strengthen the grounds on which authority is accepted as legitimate. Conversely, domination can restrict opportunities to make claims, unresponsiveness can weaken recognition, and declining recognition can expose legitimacy to erosion. The mechanism is therefore best understood as a relational circuit whose outcomes remain contingent on political practices and institutional conditions.

1. Power and differentiated responsibility

The analysis begins with the unequal capacities through which political power is exercised. Institutions can establish rules, allocate resources, set administrative priorities, and authorise coercion. Because these decisions affect the opportunities and standing of those subject to them, the exercise of authority creates relations of dependence and corresponding responsibilities. Actors with greater power over others ordinarily bear stronger obligations to justify, constrain, and account for its use. This relationship between power and responsibility is central to the article's account of ethical reciprocity. [7]

Differentiated responsibility does not mean that every exercise of authority is illegitimate or that powerful actors must satisfy every demand made upon them. It establishes instead a proportionate relationship between an actor's capacity to affect others and the responsibility to exercise that capacity consistently with their equal political standing. Responsibility is differentiated by power, institutional role, and the consequences of action; it is not allocated identically to every participant.

These obligations are not confined to government institutions. Political leaders, public officials, organised social groups, and citizens may exercise different forms of influence and therefore incur different responsibilities within particular relationships. The relevant question is not whether all actors perform identical duties, but whether the obligations attached to their respective positions can be justified within a shared political relationship.

2. Responsiveness and accountability

Differentiated responsibility acquires political significance through responsiveness and accountability. Responsiveness concerns whether institutions hear, consider, and appropriately address claims made by those affected by their decisions. Accountability concerns whether the exercise of authority remains answerable for its reasons and consequences. These functions are connected but distinct: responsiveness establishes an avenue through which claims can affect institutional conduct, while accountability requires authorities to explain and, where warranted, reconsider their decisions. [8]

Responsiveness does not entail automatic compliance. Institutions must reconcile competing claims, limited resources, and conflicting obligations. A refusal can remain compatible with ethical reciprocity when it is reasoned, proportionate, non-arbitrary, and open to appropriate scrutiny. What matters is whether claimants are treated as persons whose concerns warrant consideration and justification, rather than as subjects whose demands can be dismissed without explanation.

Accountability gives this relationship institutional substance. Elections, legislative oversight, judicial review, administrative scrutiny, transparency, public criticism, and review procedures can provide means through which decisions are questioned and corrected. Their significance extends beyond the punishment of misconduct: they help preserve the possibility of justification, revision, and institutional learning. Without such avenues, responsiveness may remain rhetorical, while responsibility becomes detached from the exercise of power. Neither responsiveness nor accountability guarantees legitimacy, but their sustained absence can weaken the reciprocal relations on which legitimacy depends.

3. Recognition and political standing

Recognition explains the normative significance of responsiveness. Political authority does not establish an ethically reciprocal relationship merely by processing claims administratively. Such a relationship requires those affected by political decisions to be treated as participants with standing in a common political order. Recognition thus connects institutional conduct to the status accorded to political subjects. [9]

Disagreement does not, by itself, demonstrate a failure of recognition. An institution may reject a claim while continuing to acknowledge the claimant's political standing, provided that the decision is open to justification and the claimant is not arbitrarily excluded from consideration. The problem arises when particular persons or groups are systematically disregarded, denied meaningful opportunities to make claims, or treated as less entitled than others to demand reasons. Under those conditions, disagreement can become a vehicle of domination.

Recognition consequently has both a normative and a relational dimension. It affirms equal political standing, while institutional practices shape whether people encounter public authority as answerable to them or merely as a power acting upon them. Ethical reciprocity requires the former relationship; it does not require agreement on every political claim.

4. Reciprocity without symmetry

Ethical reciprocity differs from symmetrical exchange. Citizens and institutions can bear reciprocal obligations while possessing substantially unequal powers and performing different roles. Citizens may

be required to comply with legitimate laws, respect the rights of others, and participate in collective political life. Public institutions, however, bear additional responsibilities because their decisions can determine or significantly affect the conditions under which citizens exercise their rights and agency.

The obligations are reciprocal because they belong to a shared political relationship, not because they are identical. Citizens are not merely passive recipients of authority, and institutions are not simply instruments for satisfying individual preferences. Each occupies a distinct position in political membership, although the extent and character of each actor's obligations vary with power, capacity, and role.

The principle can therefore be stated precisely: **equality of political standing is compatible with differentiated responsibility where obligations reflect unequal power and institutional capacity without converting those inequalities into unequal political status.** This qualification matters. Differentiated responsibility can support legitimate authority only when it constrains the exercise of power; it cannot serve as a justification for paternalism or unanswerable rule. [10]

5. Ethical asymmetry and the erosion of legitimacy

Ethical asymmetry arises when differentiated obligations become persistently one-sided and cease to be defensible within the political relationship. Institutions may demand obedience while treating responsiveness as optional; powerful actors may shape political agendas while evading accountability; or formally included groups may lack meaningful opportunities to have their claims considered. In such cases, the problem is not simply unequal power but the weakening of the responsibilities that should accompany it.

Ethical asymmetry must therefore be distinguished from inequality as such. Unequal authority and role-specific obligations may be compatible with legitimate political organisation. The decisive question is whether power remains constrained by responsibility, responsiveness, recognition, and accountability. When these relationships deteriorate systematically, asymmetry can become a form of domination rather than a defensible feature of institutional organisation.

This distinction also explains why legitimacy is neither a fixed institutional possession nor a momentary judgment of approval. Constitutional authorisation and valid procedures remain important, but they do not ensure that authority will continue to be exercised in ethically defensible ways. Conversely, disagreement, error, and coercion do not necessarily destroy legitimacy if institutions remain answerable, capable of correction, and open to justified revision. Legitimacy is therefore durable but revisable: it may withstand conflict and error, yet become increasingly vulnerable when ethical asymmetry is entrenched. This account complements procedural and institutional approaches by specifying a relational condition under which legitimacy may be sustained or eroded. [11]

6. The relational circuit

The normative mechanism operates within a broader relationship among individual agency, social norms, and institutional practices:

Individual agency ↔ Social norms ↔ Institutional practices

Individuals formulate claims and exercise political agency; social norms shape, mediate, and contest those claims; and institutions translate some claims into authoritative decisions. Institutional decisions, in turn, reshape social expectations and individuals' understandings of political membership. These dimensions are analytically distinguishable but mutually implicated: neither individual agency nor institutional conduct can be adequately understood in isolation from the social relationships through which each takes shape. [12]

The two models developed in this article perform different explanatory functions. The relationship among individual agency, social norms, and institutional practices identifies the wider context in which political relationships are formed and reproduced. The mechanism of power asymmetry, differentiated responsibility, responsiveness and accountability, recognition, and reciprocal legitimacy explains how the ethical quality of those relationships may sustain or weaken political authority. The first locates the relational setting; the second specifies the normative mechanism operating within it.

The central implication is that political legitimacy depends not only on authorisation or procedural validity but also on how authority is exercised within relationships of unequal power. Where power generates differentiated responsibilities that are discharged through meaningful responsiveness and accountability, and where those practices sustain recognition of equal political standing, asymmetry can remain compatible with legitimate authority. Where these relations become persistently one-sided, ethical asymmetry develops and legitimacy becomes more vulnerable to erosion. The mechanism explains a possibility, not an inevitability: its outcomes depend on how political actors and institutions respond to conflict, contestation, and demands for justification.

Section: IV.

Individuals, Society, and Institutions: Mutual Constitution

The relational mechanism developed in the preceding section operates within a broader setting in which individual agency, social norms, and institutional practices shape one another. Individuals act within socially structured conditions; norms are reproduced and contested through individual and collective action; and institutions stabilise, interpret, or transform social expectations through authoritative practices. These relationships are neither linear nor wholly symmetrical. Each has relative autonomy, yet none can be adequately understood in isolation from the others. The central question is how ethical reciprocity is sustained or weakened through their interaction.

The relationship can be represented as a dynamic circuit:

Individual agency ↔ Social norms ↔ Institutional practices

This formulation identifies the relational context of political legitimacy, rather than a second causal mechanism. Its significance lies in showing that legitimacy cannot be explained exclusively by individual attitudes, prevailing social values, or formal institutional arrangements. It depends also on how these dimensions interact: whether individuals can act as political agents, whether social norms sustain or obstruct equal standing, and whether institutional practices respond to the claims of those subject to political power.

1. Individual Agency within Relational Conditions

Individuals are moral and political agents with interests, judgments, identities, and capacities for action. Yet agency is never exercised in a social vacuum. It is shaped by social relationships, normative expectations, material circumstances, and institutional arrangements. A relational account therefore avoids both reducing political action to the choices of self-contained individuals and treating individuals as passive bearers of structural forces. Agency remains real, but its exercise depends partly on conditions that individuals do not create alone. [13]

Political participation illustrates this relationship. A citizen's willingness to participate may be insufficient where access to information, legal protection, material resources, or institutional channels is restricted. Conversely, institutional arrangements that protect rights and provide meaningful opportunities for participation can expand the capacity to exercise political agency. The ethical implications are relational:

citizens may bear responsibilities toward others and the political community, but the discharge of those responsibilities depends partly on whether social and institutional conditions permit meaningful action. This does not eliminate individual responsibility or imply that institutions determine every choice. It means that responsibility must be assessed in relation to the capacities and constraints under which actors operate. Ethical reciprocity therefore requires attention not only to what individuals do, but also to the conditions that enable or obstruct their participation as political equals.

2. Social Norms as Relational Mediators

Social norms mediate between individual agency and institutional authority. Shared expectations, identities, practices, and collective meanings influence what people regard as appropriate, legitimate, desirable, or unacceptable before they encounter particular institutional decisions. Norms are not simply external rules imposed on individuals: they are reproduced through interaction, acquired through social practices, and contested when people challenge their meaning or authority. Their persistence depends partly on collective expectations and patterns of conduct, but their reproduction is never entirely assured. [14]

Social norms consequently affect the social conditions of ethical reciprocity. Where humiliation, exclusion, or entrenched hierarchy are treated as normal, formal commitments to equal political standing may encounter resistance in everyday conduct. Norms of mutual respect and recognition, by contrast, can support demands that public authority justify its decisions and treat affected persons as political participants. These influences are not deterministic: exclusionary norms may persist despite legal reform, while movements for change may challenge established expectations before institutions formally respond. The relationship between norms and institutions is therefore reciprocal. Laws and public policies can alter social expectations by prohibiting discrimination, extending rights, or widening participation. Yet institutions may also reproduce prevailing hierarchies when their routines or discretionary practices embody dominant assumptions. Institutional reform is consequently neither merely a change in formal rules nor a guaranteed transformation of social attitudes. Its effects depend on how new rules are interpreted, implemented, contested, and incorporated into social practice.

3. Institutions as Embodied Political Relationships

Political institutions occupy a distinctive position within this relational setting because they possess authoritative capacities to establish rules, allocate resources, define rights and obligations, resolve disputes, and enforce decisions. They should not, however, be understood solely as organisational structures. Their rules and practices also embody and reproduce relationships of political authority: they shape who may participate, whose claims receive consideration, how obligations are distributed, and what forms of justification are required. [15]

The institutionalisation of ethical reciprocity does not require identical treatment or identical outcomes in every circumstance. Different responsibilities or forms of support may be justified by institutional role, need, vulnerability, or unequal starting conditions. For example, directing additional public resources towards disadvantaged citizens need not violate reciprocity merely because benefits are unequally distributed. Conversely, formally identical treatment may preserve substantive exclusion when people face significantly different barriers to exercising their rights. The normative question is whether institutional distinctions can be justified consistently with equal political standing and remain open to appropriate scrutiny. [16]

This qualification distinguishes responsive differentiation from arbitrary preference. Unequal treatment is not justified simply because an institution declares it necessary, nor is equal treatment sufficient simply

because a rule applies uniformly. The relevant assessment concerns the reasons for the distinction, its effects on those affected, and the opportunities available to question or review it. Institutional arrangements can thus sustain ethical reciprocity when they respond to relevant differences without treating some persons as less entitled to justification or political consideration.

Institutions nevertheless do not embody a single, uncontested normative order. Constitutional principles, legislation, administrative routines, and informal practices may pull in different directions. A formal commitment to equality, for instance, may coexist with procedures that make access difficult for some groups. The relationship between institutional commitments and their practical operation is therefore crucial to understanding whether ethical reciprocity is realised rather than merely declared.

4. Institutional Practice, Contestation, and the Relational Constitution of Legitimacy

The relationship among individuals, social norms, and institutions is continually reproduced and contested through practice. Institutions constrain action, but their operation also depends on the people who interpret, administer, comply with, challenge, and revise their rules. Citizens, in turn, participate in shaping institutional arrangements through voting, protest, deliberation, litigation, and collective organisation. Legitimacy is therefore affected not only by constitutional design or formal authorisation but also by the continuing practices through which authority is exercised and challenged.

A significant test arises when formal commitments diverge from lived experience. Institutions may guarantee rights, equality, participation, or accountability while administrative routines produce unequal access or persistent unresponsiveness. In such circumstances, the existence of a formal guarantee cannot by itself establish that the relevant political relationship is ethically reciprocal. The issue is whether institutional practice gives meaningful effect to the standing those guarantees recognise and whether failures can be questioned and corrected.

Contestation is central to this process, but it does not necessarily signify a breakdown of legitimacy. Political actors may disagree sharply while continuing to recognise one another as participants entitled to make claims and demand reasons. Social movements, opposition groups, civil society organisations, and marginalised communities may contest existing arrangements because they perceive failures of responsibility or recognition. Such challenges can expose discrepancies between institutional principles and practice and create pressure for reform. Contestation becomes corrosive when it is accompanied by systematic exclusion, dehumanisation, or arbitrary denial of others' political standing; it can instead contribute to institutional renewal when claims are heard, justified, and addressed through accountable processes. [17]

Political legitimacy should accordingly be understood as revisable rather than secured once and for all. Institutions do not remain legitimate simply because they are established, nor do they lose legitimacy whenever they face opposition. Their durability depends partly on whether they can respond to justified criticism, correct failures, and adapt without abandoning the equal political standing of those subject to their authority.

The argument of this section is that ethical reciprocity must be examined across the relations connecting agency, social norms, and institutional practice. These relations form the context within which the mechanism identified in Section III operates. Unequal power can remain compatible with legitimate authority when institutional responsibilities are exercised in ways that preserve meaningful political agency, resist exclusionary social norms, and keep public power open to justification and correction. Where the interaction among these dimensions entrenches one-sided obligations and denies effective political standing, the conditions sustaining reciprocal legitimacy are weakened. The next step is to

examine how these relationships are strained by conflict and unequal power, and why their transformation does not necessarily produce more legitimate political arrangements.

Section V

Power, Ethical Asymmetry, and Political Obligation

The preceding sections have established that political legitimacy depends partly on the ethical relationships through which unequal power is exercised. This raises a further question: how does ethical reciprocity bear upon political obligation when citizens and political institutions occupy unequal positions? Political obligation cannot be reduced either to an unconditional duty to obey the state or to a right to withdraw cooperation whenever institutions fail to meet citizens' expectations. It must instead be examined in relation to the responsibilities generated by political power, the standing of those subject to it, and the conditions under which authority remains defensible.

1. Political Obligation under Unequal Power

Political institutions differ from ordinary participants in social life because they can establish binding rules, allocate public resources, regulate conduct, and authorise coercion. These capacities create obligations for citizens while imposing responsibilities on those exercising institutional authority. Political obligation is therefore not exclusively vertical: the duties associated with political membership are connected to the responsibilities that make authority defensible. [18]

Citizens may have reasons to comply with legitimate laws, respect others' rights, and sustain institutions necessary for collective political life. Yet institutional authority cannot be justified solely by invoking these duties. Because public institutions possess powers unavailable to individual citizens, they must provide reasons for their decisions, exercise restraint, respond to relevant claims, and remain accountable for their actions.

These obligations are not symmetrical. A citizen's duty to comply with a legitimate law is not equivalent to an institution's responsibility to justify and administer it. Reciprocity requires differently situated obligations to remain connected within a defensible political relationship. The question is not whether citizens and institutions owe identical duties, but whether authority and the obligations of political membership are consistent with equal political standing.

2. Recognition as a Condition of Political Obligation

Political obligation cannot be sustained by coercion alone if authority is to maintain an ethically defensible relationship with those subject to it. Recognition matters because citizens must be treated as political agents whose claims warrant consideration and justification, even when ultimately rejected.

This does not mean that every demand must prevail. Institutions may legitimately refuse claims that conflict with constitutional commitments, others' rights, or defensible public priorities. The distinction is between rejecting a claim and denying the standing of the person or group making it. The former may be compatible with legitimate disagreement; the latter risks turning disagreement into exclusion.

Recognition becomes politically meaningful through practices that enable individuals and groups to participate in public justification: access to decision-making, fair administrative treatment, opportunities to articulate grievances, and effective means of challenging decisions. These practices matter not merely because they improve administrative performance, but because they enable those subject to authority to question its exercise. Recognition thus helps sustain a relationship in which political obligations are defensible rather than merely imposed. [19]

3. Responsibility Generated by Power

Recognition establishes the standing of political participants; the distribution of power determines the responsibilities attached to their positions. Institutions bear particular responsibilities because their decisions substantially shape the opportunities, rights, and material conditions of those subject to them. These responsibilities arise from the capacities exercised by public authority, not merely from institutional declarations.

A government that controls access to essential public services, determines administrative eligibility, or authorises coercive measures cannot treat the effects of these decisions as external to its responsibilities. The greater its capacity to shape the conditions under which others act, the stronger its obligation to justify that capacity and provide avenues for review and correction.

Citizens nevertheless remain political agents with responsibilities of their own. They may participate in collective life, respect fellow citizens' rights, contest public decisions, and contribute to maintaining or reforming common institutions. Ethical reciprocity therefore does not transfer every duty from citizens to the state. It connects differentiated responsibilities within a shared political order while recognising that institutional power has unequal consequences.

4. Ethical Asymmetry

Ethical asymmetry arises when differentiated responsibilities become persistently one-sided. Institutions may demand compliance while treating their own obligations as discretionary; political leaders may exercise authority while evading scrutiny; or formally recognised citizens may be systematically denied meaningful opportunities to challenge decisions affecting them.

Such asymmetry can develop even where formal political equality remains intact. Voting rights may coexist with systematic neglect of particular grievances; constitutionally valid institutions may remain inaccessible to those with limited resources; and lawful authority may weaken opportunities for public challenge. Formal equality alone therefore cannot establish that political relationships remain ethically reciprocal.

The converse is equally important. Unequal powers, roles, and resources do not necessarily constitute ethical asymmetry. Political institutions must sometimes make binding decisions, enforce laws, distribute scarce resources, and refuse particular demands. These functions are compatible with reciprocity when the responsibilities accompanying authority remain defensible and its exercise open to scrutiny. The distinction is between asymmetry as a feature of political organisation and ethical asymmetry arising when power becomes detached from responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability.

5. The Limits of Reciprocity

Ethical reciprocity offers neither a theory of unconditional compliance nor a licence for unilateral withdrawal from political obligation. Institutional failure does not automatically extinguish citizens' obligations to one another or to the political community. Equally, the formal existence of authority does not establish an unlimited claim to obedience. The normative question is whether political obligations remain defensible within relationships that respect equal political standing and hold power answerable.

An institution may reject a demand while preserving reciprocity if it provides defensible reasons, remains open to scrutiny, and permits appropriate correction. The position changes when disregard becomes systematic and effective channels of challenge are closed. Under such circumstances, the grounds for regarding particular demands for compliance as legitimate may weaken. This does not settle every question about political obligation; it identifies a relational condition that any adequate justification of authority must address. [20]

The limits of the argument must also be explicit. Ethical reciprocity is a normative criterion for assessing political relationships, not a complete theory of justice. It identifies central conditions of an ethically defensible relationship: equal political standing, responsibilities responsive to power and institutional position, meaningful consideration of claims, accountability, and protection against arbitrary domination. It does not independently determine the distribution of resources, the precise content of rights, the ideal constitutional structure, or the justice of every public policy.

Nor can reciprocity be equated with responsiveness to whichever claim commands the greatest numbers or political influence. Majorities may support measures that undermine minority standing; powerful social groups may demand privileges inconsistent with political equality; and institutions may confront obligations that cannot all be fulfilled simultaneously. Ethical reciprocity therefore requires reasoned consideration of competing claims within a framework of equal standing, rather than automatic deference to numerical strength or political influence.

6. From Ethical Asymmetry to a Crisis of Legitimacy

Ethical asymmetry becomes especially consequential when its effects accumulate across institutional practices. Unaccountable power can make responsiveness selective; selective responsiveness can reduce recognition to a formal declaration; and systematic denial of recognition can weaken the grounds on which citizens regard authority as defensible. Accountability may remain formally available while becoming ineffective. These developments can reinforce one another, making ethical asymmetry increasingly difficult to correct.

A crisis of legitimacy need not involve constitutional collapse or the immediate rejection of authority. It may develop incrementally as institutional power and reciprocal responsibility become disconnected. Institutions may continue operating and retain legal authority while losing the capacity to sustain the ethical justification of their demands. Legal validity, effective control, and political legitimacy are related but not interchangeable. [21]

The relational account also identifies the possibility, though not the certainty, of repair. Institutions may address legitimacy deficits by acknowledging neglected claims, accepting responsibility for failures, improving responsiveness, strengthening accountability, and reopening channels of contestation. Where failures arise from entrenched institutional arrangements, more substantial reform may be required. Repair is neither automatic nor always sufficient; its possibility depends on whether the conditions producing ethical asymmetry can be altered.

7. Political Obligation as Reciprocal but Differentiated

Political obligation is best understood here as reciprocal but differentiated. Citizens and institutions occupy unequal positions within a shared political order, generating connected but non-identical obligations. Citizens remain responsible for obligations compatible with legitimate collective authority and others' rights. Institutions bear distinctive responsibilities because their powers shape the conditions under which political membership is exercised.

The contribution of ethical reciprocity lies in specifying the relationship between these obligations. Unequal authority generates differentiated responsibility, which must be expressed through defensible institutional conduct and remain open to scrutiny and correction. Such practices help sustain recognition of those subject to power. When the relationship becomes persistently one-sided, formal authority may endure while the ethical grounds for political obligation weaken.

The argument neither requires the elimination of unequal power nor implies that every failure dissolves political obligation. It requires political power to remain ethically answerable to those whose lives and

standing it affects. Political obligation is more defensible where institutions recognise affected persons' political standing, accept responsibilities proportionate to their powers, and remain open to justified challenge and correction. Where these conditions are systematically absent, the relationship between authority and obligation becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

Section: VI.

Recognition, Responsibility, and the Reciprocity of Political Obligation

The preceding sections have developed a relational account of political legitimacy in which ethical reciprocity connects individual agency, social norms, and institutional practices under conditions of unequal power. The remaining normative question is what makes the obligations arising within these relationships ethically defensible. The answer lies in the connection between recognition, differentiated responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability. Recognition establishes the standing of those affected by political power; differentiated responsibility connects obligations to unequal positions; responsiveness gives those obligations practical expression; and accountability keeps the exercise of authority open to questioning and correction.

Recognition is therefore not simply another value to be added to reciprocity. It is a condition of reciprocal political relations: those affected by authority must be acknowledged as bearers of political standing whose claims can warrant consideration and justification. This does not make their claims automatically valid, nor does it require identical duties among participants. It establishes the normative basis on which unequal powers and differentiated obligations can be assessed.

1. Recognition as the Moral Basis of Reciprocity

Political relationships concern not only the distribution of resources and benefits but also whose claims count, who may question authority, and who is entitled to demand reasons. Formal inclusion is insufficient where individuals or groups lack meaningful opportunities to participate or challenge decisions. Recognition requires that those subject to political power be treated as persons and political participants whose standing cannot be disregarded without justification. [22]

The distinction between the standing of a claimant and the validity of a claim is crucial. An institution may legitimately reject a demand while continuing to recognise the claimant as a participant entitled to consideration and reasons. The ethical failure occurs when rejection becomes a means of denying the standing of particular persons or groups. Recognition thus permits political disagreement without treating exclusion as an acceptable substitute for justification.

Recognition also requires institutional expression. Access to public institutions, fair administrative treatment, opportunities to articulate grievances, and meaningful avenues for contesting decisions make political standing effective in practice. Without such conditions, recognition risks remaining a formal declaration, detached from the relationships through which political authority is experienced and assessed.

2. From Recognition to Differentiated Responsibility

Recognition establishes the standing of political participants; differentiated responsibility specifies the obligations arising from their positions within relationships of unequal power. Such obligations vary with authority, capacity, institutional role, dependence, and the foreseeable consequences of action. They cannot be assigned mechanically or assumed to be identical among all actors.

Political institutions have distinctive responsibilities because they can make binding rules, allocate resources, regulate conduct, administer public programmes, and authorise coercion. These capacities create obligations to justify the exercise of power and to remain responsive and accountable to those

affected. The greater an actor's capacity to shape the conditions under which others exercise their rights and agency, the stronger the responsibility to ensure that this power remains defensible.

Citizens nevertheless remain agents with obligations of their own, including respect for the rights of others, compliance with legitimate laws, and participation in common political life. Reciprocity does not simply reverse a one-directional obligation to obey into an equally one-directional obligation for institutions to satisfy citizens. It connects distinct responsibilities within a shared political relationship.

This principle may be termed **differentiated reciprocity**: obligations are connected but not identical because actors occupy different positions within relationships of political power. Equality of political standing is compatible with unequal responsibilities when those differences reflect relevant capacities and roles rather than an assumption that some participants possess lesser standing. Political authority therefore does not undermine reciprocity through asymmetry alone; the decisive question is whether its accompanying responsibilities remain ethically defensible. [23]

3. Responsiveness as the Practical Expression of Recognition

Recognition and responsibility acquire political significance through institutional practice. Responsiveness concerns whether claims can be heard, considered, and answered through intelligible processes. It does not require every demand to be accepted or every disagreement to be resolved in favour of the claimant. It requires that legitimate claims receive meaningful consideration and that refusals be capable of justification.

This qualification is essential because political legitimacy cannot depend on universal agreement. Democratic politics involves competing interests, values, and priorities. An institution may reject a demand while maintaining an ethically reciprocal relationship if its decision is reasoned, non-arbitrary, proportionate, and open to appropriate scrutiny. Conversely, a formally available process may fail to sustain reciprocity if claims are routinely ignored or particular groups are systematically denied effective access.

Responsiveness thus connects recognition to the exercise of responsibility. Recognition establishes who is entitled to make claims; differentiated responsibility identifies what power requires of those who exercise it; and responsiveness shows whether these obligations have practical consequences. When responsiveness becomes persistently absent, recognition risks becoming merely symbolic and the relationship sustaining political obligation is weakened.

4. Accountability and the Direction of Political Obligation

Accountability ensures that responsibility does not remain declaratory. Those who exercise political authority must be answerable for how their powers are used and, within appropriate limits, for their significant consequences. Elections, legislative oversight, judicial review, administrative scrutiny, transparency, public criticism, and institutional review matter because they preserve opportunities to question decisions, demand reasons, and seek correction. Accountability is therefore more than punishment: it maintains a connection between authority and those affected by its exercise. [24]

Political obligation is consequently reciprocal but not symmetrical. Citizens may owe duties to legitimate institutions because collective life requires compliance with defensible laws and respect for the rights of others. Institutions, in turn, bear differentiated responsibilities because their authority enables them to shape the conditions of political membership. Neither side's obligations are unlimited: citizens are not required to accept every institutional demand merely because it is formally authorised, and institutions are not required to grant every citizen request. Both must be assessed within a relationship that preserves equal political standing and justifiable authority.

Ethical asymmetry arises when this relationship becomes persistently one-sided: obligations continue to be imposed on citizens while those exercising power become insulated from responsibility and scrutiny. Institutions may retain formal authority while weakening the relational conditions that make their demands defensible. Accountability is therefore central to the distinction between differentiated authority and increasingly unilateral power.

5. Reciprocity and the Limits of Political Obligation

Ethical reciprocity does not establish that citizens may withdraw all political obligations whenever institutions fail, nor that formal authority creates an unlimited claim to obedience. It instead supplies a criterion for assessing whether political obligations remain ethically defensible. Where institutions fail to satisfy a particular demand but provide reasons and remain open to scrutiny and correction, reciprocity may be sustained. Where disregard becomes systematic and avenues of challenge are ineffective, the grounds for regarding particular demands for compliance as legitimate may weaken. This conclusion does not, by itself, settle every question about the scope of political obligation.

The theory should therefore be understood as a normative criterion, not a complete theory of justice. It identifies essential conditions of ethically defensible political relationships: recognition of equal political standing, responsibility proportionate to power and position, meaningful responsiveness, accountability, and protection against arbitrary domination. It does not independently determine the just distribution of resources, the precise content of rights, or the ideal constitutional structure. [25]

Nor does reciprocity require automatic deference to majority preference or to the most politically influential claimants. A majority may advance demands that undermine minority standing, while competing claims may be impossible to satisfy simultaneously. Ethical reciprocity requires institutions to consider such claims through reasoned justification consistent with equal political standing, rather than simply complying with whichever demand carries the greatest numerical or political weight.

6. From Reciprocal Obligation to Political Legitimacy

The relationship among recognition, differentiated responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability provides the normative connection between ethical reciprocity and political legitimacy:

Recognition → Differentiated responsibility → Responsiveness → Accountability → Reciprocal legitimacy

This formulation is not a rigid causal sequence. Its elements interact and sustain one another through continuing political practices. Recognition without responsibility may remain symbolic; responsibility without responsiveness may become paternalistic; responsiveness without accountability may be selective; and accountability detached from recognition may become merely procedural. The normative mechanism operates through their continuing interaction, not through the automatic presence of any single element.

The theory's contribution is not to replace accounts of legitimacy that emphasise authorisation, public justification, justice, recognition, or non-domination. It is to specify how these concerns can be connected through the relationship between unequal power and differentiated responsibility. Recognition identifies whose standing must be respected; differentiated responsibility explains why power generates unequal obligations; responsiveness shows how those obligations enter institutional practice; and accountability keeps authority open to questioning and correction. [26]

Political legitimacy can consequently be understood as a relational achievement rather than simply an attribute possessed by institutions. Its durability depends partly on whether authority is exercised through relationships in which those affected retain equal political standing, claims receive meaningful

consideration, and institutional power remains answerable for its use. When these conditions are sustained, asymmetry can be compatible with legitimate authority. When they become persistently one-sided, ethical asymmetry emerges and the grounds for political obligation become increasingly vulnerable.

The central conclusion is that reciprocity does not require identical duties or the elimination of unequal power. It requires that differentiated responsibilities remain connected within an ethically defensible political relationship. Political obligation is more defensible when those who exercise authority recognise the standing of those affected, accept responsibilities corresponding to their powers, respond meaningfully to legitimate claims, and remain open to accountability and correction. Where these conditions are systematically absent, formal authority may survive while the relational grounds of its legitimacy progressively weaken.

Section VII.

Conclusion

This article has reconceptualised political legitimacy as a relational achievement sustained through ethical reciprocity among individuals, society, and political institutions. Its central argument is not simply that ethical conduct is desirable in political life, but that the legitimacy of authority depends partly on the relationships through which power is exercised, experienced, contested, and revised. Lawful authority, democratic authorization, and institutional effectiveness remain important, but they do not, by themselves, exhaust the relational conditions of legitimate rule.

The article's theoretical contribution lies in specifying how ethical reciprocity connects unequal political power to differentiated responsibility, meaningful responsiveness, and accountability. Reciprocity does not require symmetrical exchange or identical obligations. Rather, differences in political position and capacity generate differentiated responsibilities, while recognition sustains the equal political standing of those affected by the exercise of authority. The decisive question is whether asymmetrical relationships remain open to justification, contestation, and correction. [27]

This account also clarifies the relationship among individual agency, social norms, and institutional practices. These are mutually constitutive dimensions of political life, not independent sources of legitimacy. Individuals act within inherited social relationships; norms are reproduced and contested through practice; and institutions both formalize and reshape patterns of interaction. Legitimacy consequently develops through relationships between authority and those subject to it, rather than residing exclusively in institutional arrangements or being reducible to citizen consent.

The distinction between legitimate political asymmetry and ethical asymmetry is central to the argument. Unequal authority is not inherently illegitimate: governing requires differentiated powers, including the capacity to regulate and, under appropriate constraints, coerce. Ethical asymmetry arises when the obligations imposed on citizens are persistently disconnected from the responsibilities of those who exercise power. When recognition, responsiveness, and accountability weaken, formal authority may endure even as its relational basis becomes increasingly fragile.

Ethical reciprocity does not displace theories of consent, democratic authorization, justice, constitutionalism, deliberation, recognition, or non-domination. Its contribution is to identify a relational dimension through which these concerns can be connected. It directs attention not only to the grounds on which authority is established, but also to how authority remains answerable to those affected by its exercise. This perspective helps explain why legitimacy may deteriorate despite the continuity of elections, constitutional arrangements, and legal procedures, and why its repair requires more than the preservation

of formal institutional structures. Repair becomes possible when institutions acknowledge neglected claims, assume appropriate responsibility, respond meaningfully, and restore effective accountability. The argument also opens avenues for further research. Comparative studies could investigate how the relationship between power and responsibility varies across democratic, hybrid, and authoritarian settings, and how social inequality, collective identities, and institutional design affect the capacity to secure recognition and responsiveness. Such inquiry would help establish the conditions under which ethical reciprocity can be sustained in different political contexts.

The central proposition can therefore be stated concisely: **political legitimacy is a relational achievement sustained when political power is exercised through ethical reciprocity among individuals, society, and political institutions.** Where recognition supports differentiated responsibility, responsibility is expressed through meaningful responsiveness, and authority remains accountable to those affected by its exercise, political asymmetry can be compatible with legitimate rule. Where these relationships deteriorate into exclusion, arbitrariness, or domination, formal authority may survive while substantive legitimacy declines. Ethical reciprocity thus shifts the question of legitimacy beyond why authority is obeyed to the conditions under which its exercise can be justified to those who live under it.

NOTES

Section: I (Introduction)

1. For influential approaches to the legitimacy of political authority and political obligation, see Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (London: Macmillan, 1991); John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996); Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); and A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979)..
2. For influential accounts of recognition and power, see Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). These works provide distinct theoretical resources for analysing recognition, power, and domination; they should not be treated as interchangeable or as already advancing the specific theory of ethical reciprocity developed here.
3. The distinction here is between unequal power as a feature of political relationships and the persistent failure to acknowledge or discharge the responsibilities associated with that power. The former does not, by itself, establish illegitimacy; the latter supplies a reason to question whether authority remains ethically defensible. This distinction is central to the article's argument and should be developed through the subsequent analysis rather than assumed as a self-evident conclusion.
4. The theory is intended as an account of one important dimension of political legitimacy, not as a complete criterion of justice or a sufficient test of every political decision. Questions of rights, distributive justice, democratic authorization, and competing public claims may require additional normative arguments. Ethical reciprocity helps explain the relational conditions under which

legitimacy is sustained or weakened, but it does not independently resolve every conflict among legitimate claims.

Section: II

1. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (London: Macmillan, 1991).
2. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
3. Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); Fabienne Peter, "The Grounds of Political Legitimacy," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (2010): 298–320.
4. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995). Honneth's account helps establish the significance of recognition in social and political relations, although the specific connection among recognition, differentiated responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability proposed here is the contribution of the present article.
5. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
6. Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). Pettit's account of freedom as non-domination provides a useful point of comparison for the concern with arbitrary power. The present article, however, focuses specifically on the reciprocal ethical responsibilities through which asymmetrical political relationships may sustain or undermine legitimacy.

Section: - III

1. Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Young's account of responsibility in relation to structural processes provides a useful point of comparison. The present argument differs in focusing specifically on how unequal political power generates differentiated obligations of justification and accountability within relationships relevant to legitimacy.
2. Mark Bovens, "Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework," *European Law Journal* 13, no. 4 (2007): 447–68. Bovens provides a conceptual framework for analysing accountability. Here, accountability is treated as one component of ethical reciprocity, connected to but distinct from institutional responsiveness.
3. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995). Recognition is relevant to the normative standing of persons, but the present argument does not reduce legitimacy to recognition alone; it connects recognition to differentiated responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability.
4. Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). These works offer related perspectives on freedom from domination and political justification. The article's

specific claim is that reciprocal obligations can be differentiated according to power and institutional role without implying unequal political standing.

5. David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (London: Macmillan, 1991); Fabienne Peter, “The Grounds of Political Legitimacy,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (2010): 298–320. These accounts provide relevant points of comparison for the relationship between legitimacy, justification, and the exercise of political power. The present argument foregrounds the continuing ethical relations through which legitimacy may be sustained or weakened.
6. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Both works help situate agency and practice within socially structured relationships. The model presented here uses that broader relational insight to distinguish the context of political action from the specific normative mechanism proposed to explain legitimacy.

Section: - IV

1. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). These works provide points of comparison for understanding agency in relation to socially structured conditions. The present argument focuses specifically on the implications of those relations for ethical reciprocity and political legitimacy.
2. Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986): 273–86. Swidler’s account of culture and action is relevant to the argument that social norms influence conduct without mechanically determining it.
3. James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989). This work provides a useful institutional perspective for examining how rules and organisational practices shape political conduct. The present argument adds an explicitly ethical question concerning the relationships of responsibility and political standing embodied in institutional practice.
4. Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Young’s analysis of structural injustice helps illuminate why formally equal rules may operate under unequal social conditions. The present argument uses this insight to clarify why ethically defensible institutional differentiation must be assessed in relation to equal political standing.
5. Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Young’s work is relevant to the political significance of inclusion, representation, and the participation of marginalised groups. The present argument treats contestation as potentially corrective when institutions remain open to claims and accountable for their responses.

Section: - V

1. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). These works provide important points of reference for debates about political obligation, authority, and the justification of obedience. The present argument does not seek to settle every dispute concerning political obligation; it asks how the unequal distribution of political power affects the responsibilities required to sustain ethically defensible authority.

2. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995). Honneth's account illuminates the normative significance of recognition. The argument developed here connects recognition more specifically to institutional responsiveness and the conditions under which political obligation remains defensible.
3. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). Simmons's analysis is relevant to the question of whether the existence of political authority is sufficient to establish political obligation. The present account identifies ethical reciprocity as one criterion for assessing the defensibility of political relationships, rather than as a complete solution to the problem of political obligation.
4. David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (London: Macmillan, 1991); Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975). These works provide relevant perspectives on the grounds of legitimate power and the possibility of crises in the justification of political authority. The present argument focuses on the gradual weakening of legitimacy when institutional power becomes detached from reciprocal responsibility and effective accountability.

Section: - VI

1. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*. Honneth's account helps establish the normative significance of recognition. The present argument specifies its role in political legitimacy by connecting recognition to differentiated responsibility and the institutional treatment of claims.
2. Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Young's analysis of responsibility under conditions of structural inequality provides a relevant comparison. The present concept of differentiated reciprocity focuses more specifically on how unequal political power generates different but connected obligations within relationships of political authority.
3. Mark Bovens, "Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework," *European Law Journal* 13, no. 4 (2007): 447–68. Bovens provides a conceptual framework for accountability. The present argument treats accountability as an institutional condition through which political power remains answerable to those affected by its exercise.
4. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). These works provide relevant points of comparison concerning political justification and protection against domination. Ethical reciprocity is proposed here as a criterion for assessing the relationships through which political obligation is sustained, not as a comprehensive theory of justice.
5. David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (London: Macmillan, 1991); Fabienne Peter, "The Grounds of Political Legitimacy," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (2010): 298–320. These works provide points of comparison for evaluating the grounds of legitimate political power. The present theory's specific contribution is to connect unequal power, differentiated responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability within a relational account of legitimacy.

Section: - VII

1. David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (London: Macmillan, 1991); Fabienne Peter, "The Grounds of Political Legitimacy," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (2010): 298–320. These works provide relevant points of comparison for the article's account of political legitimacy. The present argument extends that discussion by emphasizing the relational connection between asymmetrical power, differentiated responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability.