L

Legitimacy

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Concept

Legitimacy is at core concept across the social sciences. While there are many definitions of legitimacy, scholars widely agree that legitimacy reflects a right to rule and a fundamental social taken for grantedness of political (including legal) institutions (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Academic research into legitimacy typically distinguishes "normative legitimacy" from "sociological legitimacy." The normative study of legitimacy is concerned with the standards institutions must adhere to in order to be legitimate, meaning that researchers articulate the principles driving institutions' right to rule (Bellamy & Weale, 2015; Bäckstrand & Kuyper, 2017). In the sociological tradition, research is concerned with the public belief that political authority is rightful and appropriately exercised (Arnesen & Peters, 2018; Bradford et al., 2014).

Normative and sociological legitimacy are thus analytically distinct. If people feel an institution is entitled to possess power, it does not tell us whether this rule is appropriate. Conversely, publics might reject political authority even if it is appropriately exercised. Nonetheless, normative and sociological legitimacy are related, as normative principles are inspired by what is conceived of as rightful in a given social context, and public beliefs are evaluated through the lens of whether legitimacy beliefs help or hurt desired social and political change (Strebel et al., 2019).

The notion of political legitimacy overlaps with the concept of political trust or confidence (Hartley & Jarvis, 2020; Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2021). Trust is as an evaluative orientation toward political institutions and their representatives, which is shaped by both utilitarian self-interest and moral considerations about whether a political entity and its actions are desirable. Legitimacy is the belief that institutions use their power appropriately and as such reflects the belief in the right of that institution to possess power. In this sense, legitimacy is commonly seen as exclusively rooted in moral-based considerations (Dellmuth et al., 2019; Lenz & Viola, 2017).

There is also overlap with the notion of compliance. Legitimacy is a belief, which is rooted in internalized norms and rules of a political system and a felt duty to obey with those norms and rules (Bradford et al., 2014). Because individuals who hold legitimacy beliefs tend to accept political regimes (Grauvogel & Von Soest, 2014), political parties (Ignazi, 2020), and their decisions (Arnesen & Peters, 2018), they also tend to comply with those decisions. In this way, legitimacy underpins socioeconomic hierarchies and the stability of political institutions, be they autocratic or democratic.

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Research Approaches and Key Findings

There are three main strands of research about political legitimacy: the sources of legitimacy, the legitimation and delegitimation, and the consequences of legitimacy. In each strand, there are both sociological and normative accounts of various political institutions, such as local and national governments, law and order authorities, and international institutions at regional and global levels. The existing literature predominantly seeks to understand legitimacy as an outcome (e.g., Bradford et al. (2014), Dellmuth and Tallberg (2021)), but there is also some research about its social and political consequences (e.g., Schmidt (2016), Teng and Wang (2021)). In terms of methodology, normative accounts rely on philosophical reasoning and empirical illustrations from specific governance arrangements (Sleat, 2014; Bäckstrand & Kuyper, 2017). In contrast, legitimacy research in the sociological tradition examines public perceptions using public opinion polls and survey experiments of measures of legitimacy such as political trust, regime support, or decision acceptance, from different epistemological vantage points (Lee et al., 2014; Arnesen & Peters, 2018).

Sources of Legitimacy

A first, central debate revolves around the question of *what are the sources or drivers of legitimacy.* In this debate, scholars have mainly examined how procedures (input) and performance (output) matter for legitimacy (cf. Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). A long literature has demonstrated that procedural justice matters, in the sense that citizens perceive institutions to be legitimate if they have made repeated experiences that they are fair, both with respect to national (Arnesen & Peters, 2018; Lee et al., 2014) and international institutions (Dellmuth et al., 2019; Strebel et al., 2019). In the context of the European Monetary Union (EMU), legitimacy is contractarian and "demoicratic": in order for the EMU to be stable, we require consent among multiple "demoi" through accountability arrangements (Bellamy & Weale, 2015). Yet the EU has often prioritized output instead, in particular in times of crisis, creating legitimacy challenges (Bradford et al., 2014). In the context of the EU, EU actors also evaluate legitimacy based on throughput or rules-based governance (Schmidt, 2016). In relation to a broader range of international organizations, both procedures and performance shape legitimacy beliefs (Dellmuth et al., 2019).

Legitimation and Delegitimation

Second, research has focused on legitimacy as an object of legitimation and delegitimation processes and asked *how legitimacy is gained, maintained, or lost through political discourse and institutional reform*. Political authority invites politicization and active legitimation and delegitimation attempts (Hooghe et al., 2019). The ongoing backlash against the liberal international order parallels a lively communication by elites, such as authoritarian actors who seek to retain authority by relying on identity-based legitimacy claims (Von Soest, 2017), but also nonstate actors, such as political parties, who are at pains to assert themselves as legitimate actors (Ignazi, 2020). As citizens typically have limited knowledge of politics, they rely on heuristics to form legitimacy perceptions (Lenz & Viola, 2017; Ignazi, 2020). Thus, elite communication often succeeds in swaying public legitimacy beliefs toward national and international institutions; typically, attempts to delegitimize political authority have stronger effects on citizen legitimacy beliefs than positive cues or framings (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2021). Next to discursive legitimation and delegitimation attempts, elites can rely on institutional strategies, such as democratic orchestration in climate governance, to bolster legitimacy through networked governance (Bäckstrand & Kuyper, 2017).

Consequences of Legitimacy

A third strand of research has focused on the question of *what are the consequences of legitimacy for regime stability.* When citizens believe in the legitimacy of political institutions, they have internalized their rules and norms and accept that they possess power. Thus, legitimacy contributes to securing and maintaining political order, both in democratic and autocratic systems: In China, climate governance has evolved toward multiactor arrangements and procedural coordination between local and national levels, which have

enhanced public legitimacy beliefs without strengthening civic rights and liberal democracy (Teng & Wang, 2021). In authoritarian and hybrid regimes, which draw on identity, procedures, and performance in varying mixes, sanctions often fail because rulers mobilize competing legitimacy claims (Grauvogel & Von Soest, 2014). In general, when citizens feel powerless, this can further increase regime acceptance and lead citizens to justify the existing political system more strongly (Van Van Der Toorn et al., 2015). Legitimacy can also help or hurt effective governance and thus produce a "virtuous circle" or a "vicious circle" between legitimacy and effectiveness in areas of limited statehood (Schmelzle & Stollenwerk, 2018). When legitimacy is low, then a system's ability to respond effectively to crises is jeopardized—but not impossible, as there are other forms of civic engagement of communities to support crisis responses from below (Hartley & Jarvis, 2020).

Future Directions

This brief review has surfaced what is a vast literature spanning across different social science disciplines. The central findings in existing research simultaneously open up for avenues for future research. In the study of the drivers of legitimacy, how input, output, and throughput combine—and trade off—in different settings in shaping legitimacy could be further researched. Research designs comparing across issue areas and organizations are needed to unpack the sources of legitimacy, develop better measures of normative principles, and generalize beyond single-case studies. In research on legitimation and delegitimation, future work on elite communication should probe how elite and mass polarization, and the salience of political issues, affect legitimacy beliefs, using field and survey experiments that track the conditions for and durability of cueing and framing effects. Research on orchestration should explore the participatory and accountability designs that actually raise legitimacy, both normative and perceived, particularly in understudied contexts in the Global South and in authoritarian contexts. Finally, in the study of the consequences of legitimacy, authoritarian rulers' attempts to seek legitimacy warrant comparative studies of the conditions under which external sanctions and internal elite communication bolster or challenge, through public perceptions, authoritarian regimes. In particular, open questions include when powerlessness increases system justification or underpins reform pressure or political instability, both in autocracies and democracies.

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