

Political Legitimacy and Democracy

The stability and functioning of any kind of political regime – including democratic or representative ones – relies on the combination of the capacity of rulers and government officials to use coercion and the development of political legitimacy. Political legitimacy

their entire political system and the decisions of their rulers. Accordingly, two things can be expected from political systems that have a considerable level of political legitimacy. First, these political systems will be more resilient to survive periods of crisis, and, second, rulers and authorities will enjoy a fundamental condition needed to formulate and implement policies in an effective manner (i.e., they will be able to make decisions and commit resources without needing to obtain approval from the ruled and without resorting to coercion for every decision). The issue of political legitimacy can therefore be considered to be of utmost importance in politics and political analysis.

Regarding the relationship between political legitimacy and democracy, the first thing that needs to be acknowledged is that most of the essential features of democratic systems (e.g., the recognition of all citizens as political equals and the right of the citizens to self-rule mainly through the election of their rulers) make this relationship very complex and extremely significant. Furthermore, given the current worldwide legitimacy of democracy as a form of political regime and the spread of representative governments around the world in the last few years – on the one hand – and the seeming contradiction between this and an apparent crisis of democratic legitimacy both in established and new democracies – on the other –, it is critical to consider some of the most important issues and trends regarding the relationship between democracy and legitimacy.

Democratic legitimacy has very frequently been defined as citizen orientations toward the main principles of the political regime or the entire political system (i.e., democracy and not a particular administration, needs to be perceived as the best form of government or at least as the least evil). The main problem with this definition is that it does not recognize that other objects of political legitimacy can be equally significant for the functioning and prospects of a democratic regime. For example, it is clear that a persistent negative perception of the performance of democratic authorities and institutions can erode the legitimacy of democracy as a form of government. Fortunately, in the last few years it has become more common to assume that democratic legitimacy or support for democracy is a multidimensional phenomenon. Extensive empirical research found that there are at least five important dimensions of political legitimacy that are relevant for the stability and effectiveness of democratic regimes: (1) support for the political community; (2) support for the core regime principles, norms, and procedures; (3) assessment of the regime performance; (4) support for the regime institutions; and (5) support for the authorities.

Addressing the sources of political legitimacy or the development of democratic legitimacy poses additional challenges. In a democratic regime with a considerable level of legitimacy, citizens have developed a commitment to democracy that is not dependent on the performance of a particular administration. This is largely the situation in established or consolidated democracies due to the fact that democracy has been practiced for a long time and because these democratic regimes have demonstrated an important capacity to find solutions to the problems of the society. It is therefore clear

Doctrine of Popular Sovereignty; Political Alienation; Political Culture; Political Efficacy; Political Ideology and Voting; Representative Democracy.

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