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The Legitimacy Puzzles

Political legitimacy, for decades a bedrock concept in political science and appropriated by journalists and diplomats as part of their discourse on nation-states, is in trouble. Many books and articles have empirically demonstrated a protracted decline in political legitimacy and a rising disaffection among citizens of advanced industrial democracies. Yet the dire consequences of legitimacy's decline, predicted by the seminal works in the field, have not occurred. Wondering why those anticipated crises have *not* materialized has led us to reexamine our understanding of legitimacy theory and to test it with an unusually rich multi-country database.

Modern legitimacy theory originated with Max Weber's three-fold typology from *Politics as a Vocation,* a lecture delivered in 1919 (Weber 1965). He distinguished between "charismatic," "traditional," and "rational-legal" forms of legitimation of the state, arguing that the first two are unstable forms that eventually evolve into the rational-legal form dominated by a state bureaucracy. Weber, however, was not focused on the *democratic* state, and it was not until the 1960s that contemporary legitimacy theory began to emerge. Seymour Martin Lipset's classic work *Political Man* (1961) reviewed the long-term, historical process by which regimes overcome crises and evolve into stable political systems whose right to rule is widely accepted. David Easton then elaborated extensively on the concept of political legitimacy (Easton 1965a; Easton 1975), suggesting various subcategories of legitimacy.

Despite the wealth and stability of established democracies including the United States, surveys show that public trust in government,

politicians, and public institutions has declined markedly since the 1960s.[1] As Hetherington (1998) observed for the United States, "With the exception of upturns in the early 1980s and mid-1990s, trust in government has declined dramatically over the past thirty years." Scholars and public figures have repeatedly voiced alarm that democracy itself might thus be threatened by declining legitimacy – that is, by a rise in the proportion of disaffected citizens (Miller 1974; Kornberg and Clarke 1992; Craig 1993; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Nye 1997; Nye et al. 1997; Pharr and Putnam 2000a; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Dalton 2004).

If legitimacy is as important to political stability as the classical literature argues, then it should have observable effects. Early empirical research stressed the importance of legitimacy for stability in the then-undemocratic Mexico (Coleman 1976; Davis and Coleman 1983). More recently, Rose, Shin, and Munro (1999), using 1997 public opinion data, reported that South Koreans wanted more democracy from their corrupt, popularly elected regime than it was supplying, but that democracy nevertheless remained legitimate and stable despite this deficit. Mishler and Rose (1999) argued that an upward trajectory of public support is important for the survival of new democracies. In their study of surveys from Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia (and later the Czech and Slovak republics), Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia in the early 1990s, they found that support for the regimes of these postcommunist democracies grew over time. Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi's (2005) study of twelve African countries from 1999 to 2001 reported that, despite a deficit between citizens' demand for democracy and the amount of democracy they perceived, support for democracy was very broad in most countries. Perception of political freedom and evaluation of presidential performance had the greatest impact on citizen commitment to democracy.

Whether discussing new democracies, as do the scholars just cited, or more developed ones, most analysts assume that legitimacy affects system stability. Those who have observed legitimacy's long-term erosion in developed democracies also expect a discernible effect from this change.

[1] See the extensive bibliography collected by Norris (1999b) and contributors to her *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance,* and by Nye, Zelikow, and King (1997) and contributors to their book *Why People Don't Trust the Government*. See also Citrin 1974; Miller 1974; Finkel, Muller, and Seligson 1989; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Nye 1997; Warren 1999; Pharr, Putnam, and Dalton 2000c, 2002; Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence 2003.

As Russell Dalton, a leader in recent empirical research on legitimacy in advanced industrial democracy, expresses it: "Weakening ties to the political community in a democratic system might foretell eventual revolution, civil war, or the loss of democracy" (Dalton 2004). We know, however, that despite declining mass support, those developed democracies seem nowhere near collapse, and even widespread antisystem protest activity is very uncommon.[2] While it is true that explosive riots wracked Seattle, Washington, in the United States in 1999 and that similar protests occurred in Western Europe, such dramatic outbursts have been sporadic, self-contained, and very limited in their magnitude and frequency. Moreover, such unrest has not come close to destabilizing the regimes of the countries in which they occurred.

These instances of *declining legitimacy with no apparent impact on system stability* nicely frame the central conundrum of research in this field: One might ask, "Where's the beef?" What are and where are the missing effects of legitimacy's observed decline? If institutional legitimacy has indeed declined so much in recent decades, why have we not by now observed at least a few breakdowns of established democracies, or more frequent and widespread protests directed at them? And why do even the newer democracies, with significantly worse performance than developed democracies, appear to enjoy strong popular support?

One answer to these questions might be Easton and Lipset's notion of a "reservoir" of support. They suggest, in effect, that a reserve of legitimacy can accumulate over years of satisfactory regime performance and socialization, and therefore may erode only slowly. As Hetherington (1998) notes, in the 1950s, Robert Lane (1962) found that the average citizen viewed the government as a benign force, providing benefits and protections. But "that was then," as they say. The 1960s are long gone, and citizens in the United States no longer hold this seemingly uncritical view of their political system. The reservoir theory rings hollow as an explanation for the absence of a discernible impact of eroding legitimacy in light of several facts. Institutional legitimacy scores have been

[2] Przeworski et al. (2000) find that the only variable that matters in predicting democratic breakdown is economic development: "no democracy has ever been subverted [i.e., broken down], not during the period we studied nor even before nor after, regardless of everything else, in a country with a per capita income higher than that of Argentina in 1975: $6,055. There is no doubt that democracy is stable in affluent countries." The stability of wealthy countries in the post–World War II period, then, would appear to be completely independent of political legitimacy (and all other mass politics attitudes). We have doubts about this sweeping notion.

trending downward in the United States ever since the 1960s.[3] Indeed, one wonders whether there is a bottom to the reservoir. Yet despite this steady decline, citizen behavior does not seem to match. For example, the 2004 U.S. national election experienced a 10 percent voter turnout *increase*, and new citizen campaign finance participation through the Internet surged (Gans 2004). Moreover, in advanced industrial democracies generally, where studies show similar, steady declines in institutional legitimacy, Pippa Norris has nevertheless found impressive increases in citizen involvement in new forms of conventional political participation (Norris 2002). These developments run contrary to what one would have expected in the presence of eroded legitimacy.

Even many newly democratizing countries – ones that could not possibly enjoy any significant accrued reservoir of legitimacy because their regimes themselves were quite new – have survived system-wrenching crises. For example, the post–military rule constitutional democratic system in Argentina emerged more or less intact from extreme economic and political crises in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Moreover, democratically elected governments in Nicaragua and Honduras have retained formal democratic institutions despite extraordinarily poor economic performance over protracted periods. Colombia's government, with a longer experience of electoral democratic rule than Argentina, Honduras, and Nicaragua, has nonetheless struggled with decades of guerrilla insurgency. Aggravated by a horrific record of drug-related violence, the Colombian conflict has at times bordered on civil war. Yet formal electoral democracy has survived, indeed prospered, in that country. Further, the levels of support for democracy reported in African and new European and Asian democracies seem quite high for their actual performance levels, and few if any of those cases have been democracies long enough to build up a reservoir of support for the regimes (Mishler and Rose 1999; Rose, Shin, and Munro 1999, Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2005).

The Latin American examples mentioned above seem to suggest that democratic regimes might never fail, irrespective of political or economic performance. But, of course, we know democracies do fail. Not all remain stable. Alberto Fujimori staged an executive coup d'etat that extinguished democracy in Peru, and yet he enjoyed considerable popular support. Bolivia and Ecuador have experienced considerable antiregime protests, riots, and mobilization during the early and mid-2000s, and several of their presidents were forced from office. In Venezuela, a short-lived

[3] Excluding a transitory rebound after September 11, 2001.

coup forced out an elected president, Hugo Chávez,[4] who nonetheless managed to resume his post and won an even larger victory in his next electoral contest.

What does legitimacy theory say about these divergent and discrepant cases? Why do long-term and persistent legitimacy declines seem to have no effect on advanced industrial democracies? And why did the Argentine, Nicaraguan, and Colombian democratic regimes survive their crises and turmoil, while those of Ecuador and Bolivia suffered unconstitutional perturbations in the political order clearly related to mass anger at the regime? That such questions must be asked indicates a disjuncture between what legitimacy theory predicts and what is actually taking place: Sharply declining legitimacy in established democracies does not seem to consistently cause anything close to regime breakdown. Some new democracies do fail, conforming to theory that suggests they should break down, while others confound the theory by surviving under apparently high levels of stress. Is there something wrong with the theory that prevents us from making better predictions? Is the theory itself at fault? If so, is political legitimacy then largely or entirely irrelevant to political stability or even protest? Yet, if we throw out the legitimacy "baby with the bath water," then what explains why some nations have been so stable for so long, while others confront regular crises of stability? What is our alternative theory to explain variation in the dependent variable (i.e., stability)?

One alternative approach to the failure of a theory to explain reality is not to critique the theory itself, because it might be fundamentally correct. Rather, one must consider instead whether researchers might have incorrectly conceptualized and measured central concepts. In our case, empirical inquiry into legitimacy may not have asked the right questions or employed the correct variables. Many scholars who support the claims of legitimacy theory but find its inability to make sound predictions disappointing would certainly welcome a finding of this nature.

In this book, we attempt to show that problems of measurement have obscured important aspects of the theory, and we hope that by clarifying the former, we will have advanced the latter. Our review of the scholarly literature below reveals that much remains to be learned about political legitimacy's measurement, which in turn will help reveal much about its origins and its effects on political systems. We believe these legitimacy puzzles

[4] Chávez's credibility as a democrat has shrunk rapidly as he has dismantled restraints on the executive. As a result, beyond respect for formal elections, most of the trappings of democracy have been sharply attenuated; yet, by a minimalist definition of democracy based on free and fair elections, Venezuela has remained democratic.

persist in large part because of obstacles to understanding raised by the design of prior research and by the lack of appropriate empirical data on a sufficient range of countries. Thus, while we do not wish to diminish the important theoretical and empirical contributions in the field, many key questions about legitimacy have not yet been asked, while others have not been fully answered. This book, therefore, focuses on solving, to the extent possible, what we consider the three biggest puzzles about legitimacy: What is its structure? What are its sources? What are its effects?

We believe that, with better measurement and with the contours and sources of legitimacy better known, we may yet confirm the theory of democratic legitimacy or a revised version of it. This would then allow us to determine whether the contradictory outcomes in the real word discussed above do indeed fit with the theory. Should we vindicate important aspects of the theory, political scientists and political elites would need to pay careful attention to public opinion data on legitimacy. Alternatively, if even extensive efforts to improve legitimacy's measurement and contextualize its effects do not yield better real world predictions, the time may well have come to reevaluate the utility of the theory or seriously refine it.

We turn now to a review of the scholarly literature on legitimacy and its related notion of "political support," arranged around the puzzles of structure, origins, and consequences. This will facilitate later empirical exploration of the concept in hopes of clarifying legitimacy's structure, examining its sources, and elucidating its impact on political systems.

PRIOR RESEARCH ON LEGITIMACY

Legitimacy (broadly conceived as citizen support for government) is a theoretically rich concept, yet we contend that it remains insufficiently verified empirically. We concur with the recent conclusion of Nathan (2007: 3) that "diffuse regime support is a difficult concept to measure. It is separate from public support for, or the popularity of, specific policies or specific incumbents. It is intrinsically multidimensional and in principle cannot be captured by a single questionnaire item. And the field so far lacks an established, accepted measure or set of measures of this concept." In our view, not only does the construct validity of legitimacy remain poorly verified,[5] but also much remains to be learned about legitimacy's origins or effects on

[5] Construct validity refers to whether a variable (or in our case a group of related variables) is internally coherent (internal validity) and measures what it purports to measure in the empirical world (external validity).

political stability. Researchers have assumed, but seldom empirically demonstrated, that citizens' support for their regime somehow affects regime survival chances. It has been argued, for example, that the Weimar Republic fell and Hitler was elected because of the regime's lack of legitimacy. Yet, the complete absence of survey data from Germany in the 1920s and 1930s leaves that assertion untested and, ultimately, untestable. Beyond the German case, observers attribute the widespread collapse of Europe's pre–World War II democracies to legitimacy problems, but no empirical research supports that contention (Bermeo 2003). Determining the consequences of legitimacy decline could be especially important for nascent or younger democracies because even a relatively small loss of system support might undermine their fledgling institutions and undermine democracy itself.

Some scholars, foremost among them Adam Przeworski (1986: 50–53), have observed the failure of legitimacy research to make good predictions about regime survival and have dismissed entirely the value of the legitimacy concept. Przeworski sees legitimacy as a tautological concept: if a regime survives it is legitimate; if it fails it is not. In his critique, which appears in a volume examining the breakdown of authoritarian regimes, Przeworski argues that a country could move from dictatorship to democracy "even if no loss of legitimacy is suffered by the authoritarian system" (Przeworski 1986: 52). He contends that regimes do not collapse when they lose legitimacy but only when their citizens see prospects for a viable alternative system.

As others and we have seen it, this argument suffers from the weakness that individuals would not in fact prefer an alternative regime were the existing system viewed as legitimate. Why would individuals risk the economic and social chaos, not to mention life and limb, if they did not believe that their regime were so reprehensible that the risks were in some way worth it (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008)? The fall of the Nicaragua's Somoza dictatorship is an ideal example: a dynasty that ruled for decades eventually delegitimized itself with a series of disastrous errors of governance that alienated the very sectors that had propped it up for so long.[6] The demise of authoritarian rule in Korea is another well-documented case (Shin 1999: 1–2, 91–92).

Gilley (2009) articulates another weakness in the Przeworski critique. He points out that legitimacy theorists do not argue for immediate

[6] The loss of Somoza's legitimacy among both the Nicaraguan population and the international community is traced by Booth (1985) and discussed in Chapter 3 of this book.

breakdown when a dictatorial regime loses its legitimacy. Rather, Gilley contends, there will be lags between legitimacy loss and regime breakdown, sometimes long ones, which is precisely what happened with the demise of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua. Moreover, the limitation of Przeworski's position is that his measurement of legitimacy consists only of the presence or absence of a viable opposition. In contrast, in Gilley's work and in our study, we measure legitimacy independently – as an attitudinal phenomenon. As Gilley (2009: Chapter 5) states, "properly measured, legitimacy ... is the most critical and parsimonious explanation of why countries democratize.... It is the inability of authoritarian rulers to legitimize their rule that critically undermines it."

The Przeworski critique notwithstanding, for many scholars legitimacy is a bedrock concept in political science, one that has two distinct traditions. Weatherford (1992: 150–51) observes that the earliest understanding of legitimacy consisted of "the view from above." This perspective "takes for granted the epistemic assumption that an outside observer, relying on fairly gross aggregate evidence, can measure the legitimacy of a political system and rank it in comparison with other systems" (Weatherford 1992: 150). This approach is exemplified in studies of legislatures, for example (Pitkin 1967), and also in Dahl's early work (Dahl 1956). That perspective has been largely supplanted by an approach that Weatherford calls "the view from the grass roots," which relies on *citizen evaluations* of the legitimacy of their system. This newer approach is, in our view, far more consistent than the former one with the theoretical basis of legitimacy because all definitions of the concept ultimately rely on the *perceptions* of citizens. In the past, however, researchers could not systematically measure such perceptions and thus had to rely upon their own judgments as a *proxy* for legitimacy. With the widespread availability of public opinion data, it has become possible to draw on surveys to measure legitimacy. As we shall see, however, even survey research itself has to date encountered various limitations, which our efforts here attempt to overcome.

Legitimacy's Structure

Almost all empirical research in the field springs from David Easton's (1965a, 1975) pioneering theory, which recast the definition of political legitimacy within the framework of what he called "political support." Easton's framework divided political support into certain components that are more generalized (related to fundamental values) and others that

are more specific (the evaluation of well-known leaders). Easton (1975: 435) asked: "Can a valid distinction be made between specific and diffuse support? Should support in either of these modes be construed as unidimensional or multidimensional?" His argument in favor of multidimensionality continues to shape the discussion and research on this question, with some scholars denying the distinction (Rogowski 1974) but most accepting it as the basic starting point for their analyses. In this book, we follow that more widely accepted point of view. We begin our theorizing with Easton's specific/diffuse distinction and build on it to provide what we believe is a subtler and conceptually more defensible empirical definition of the term.

Easton defined legitimacy as citizens' attitudes, specifically "the conviction 'that it is right and proper . . . to obey the authorities and to abide by the requirements of the regime.'" He identified two main dimensions of political support according to their objects – diffuse support (which he further divided into attitudes toward the political community and toward the regime) and specific support (oriented toward the performance of political authorities).[7] Considerable empirical work in the field strongly supports Easton's distinction between specific and diffuse support, and our own empirical findings here support that framework, even though we elaborate upon them somewhat more than Easton initially did. Thus, Rogowski's objection that the distinction was meaningless because citizens themselves did not in fact make it has not found support in the empirical literature (Muller and Jukam 1977; Muller and Williams 1980; Muller, Jukam, and Seligson 1982; Seligson 1983).

More recent theorizing about political legitimacy begins with a discussion by Nye and Zelikow (1997). Norris and others (Dalton 1999; Newton 1999; Norris 1999) build upon this base, refine Easton's conceptualization of legitimacy, and further explicate its dimensionality. Pippa Norris (1999c: 11–12) theorizes that political legitimacy (in the orientations of citizens) has five components based on opinion favoring or critical of certain objects, each defining a dimension: These are the

[7] Easton (1965b) elaborated these notions in his earlier work. This has led several scholars to suggest that Easton had a three-dimensional notion in mind (political community, the regime, and the authorities). This is the notion that Dalton (1996, 2004) employs. Our rendering of the thesis as two dimensions in which community and regime are subdimensions of "diffuse support" does not contradict that reading, but merely sees the first two dimensions as distinct from the third. Moreover, many years ago coauthor Seligson's team taught a graduate seminar with Easton at the University of Arizona in which Easton accepted this definition.

political community (the nation), regime principles (core values of the political system), regime performance (the functioning of the regime in practice), regime institutions (the actual institutions of the government), and political actors (incumbent leaders). Following Easton, these range from the general to the specific. Taken together, the discussions by Easton, Norris, and Dalton essentially depict multiple legitimacy dimensions and subdimensions, each based upon a particular political object or class of objects. By implication, individual citizens may be more or less supportive of each dimension, and different countries would thus have varying contours of legitimacy based on their citizenries' mean positions on the dimensions.

While researchers increasingly have grasped the multidimensional nature of legitimacy, empirical measurement has lagged behind. Most empirical research on legitimacy at first relied largely on a handful of "trust in government" items developed by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center (Citrin and Muste 1999). Those questions asked, for example, "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?"[8] Efforts to verify empirically legitimacy's multidimensionality lagged well behind Easton's theorizing but eventually progressed through two basic stages. Lowenberg (1971) provoked a debate by arguing that Easton's distinction between specific and diffuse support was not empirically verifiable, and Rogowski (1974) also challenged this dichotomy. In a now classic debate, Miller (1974) argued that the declines observed in the Michigan trust in government series revealed rising political alienation in the United States, while Citrin (1974) countered that the trust measure tapped only superficial discontent with the elected officials of the day. Ensuing articles questioned the reliability and validity of the trust in government items and provided (Seligson 1983) the first empirical verification of diffuse and specific support dimensions (Muller and Jukam 1977; Muller et al. 1982; Seligson 1983; Citrin and Muste 1999).

Despite this promising beginning and notwithstanding the widespread recognition of the importance of disaggregating legitimacy/support, much subsequent empirical research relied on only one dimension. We suspect that this limitation of measurement had more to do with restrictions in questionnaire design than to strong theoretical arguments against the use of a more nuanced, multidimensional perspective. A good example of this

[8] See Citrin and Muste (1999: 481–83) for the items.