

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 can be described as people's recognition and acceptance of the validity of the rules of 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

that the performance of democratic governments has been and probably still is one of the most powerful factors for the development of democratic legitimacy. Moreover, it seems reasonable to contend that in order to avoid a decline in political legitimacy, democratic governments need to convince their citizens, with some frequency, that they are receiving something in return for their compliance. This is easier to achieve in established democracies where governments are capable of formulating and enforcing public policies and where the continued experience with democracy has enabled the development of a considerable reservoir of democratic legitimacy among citizens. On the contrary, new democracies very frequently face more challenges in their development of legitimacy because they lack a record of past achievements and have serious limitations when formulating and implementing effective public policies. Finally, considering the centrality of popular perceptions about government performance on the development and maintenance of democratic legitimacy, it is important to note that the economic performance of democratic governments (i.e., economic stability and progress) is highly valued by their citizens; however, these citizens also expect from their democratic governments the provision of public order and security, an unbiased and effective rule of law, free and fair elections, etc.

Also, regarding the dynamics of democratic legitimacy and its impact on political stability there is the tendency to contend that democratic legitimacy is much more of an elite rather than a popular phenomenon (i.e., what really matters is the democratic commitment of political elites). However, as several historical and recent cases in both developed and developing countries have shown, the strategic calculations of political elites are very often heavily shaped by the distribution of political and regime preferences at the popular level. Hence, the lack of support for democratic legitimacy among ordinary citizens—especially during periods of societal crisis—can be a powerful factor behind a process of democratic regression or democratic breakdown.

Finally, current empirical research reveals that both established and new democracies are suffering an important decline in some of the key aspects of democratic legitimacy, at least among ordinary citizens. Along with this common trend, there are also some critical differences. In the case of established democracies, the erosion of democratic legitimacy seems to be basically constrained to democratic institutions and authorities. On the contrary, in the case of several new democracies, not only is democratic legitimacy itself a much more volatile phenomenon, but its erosion seems to be affecting some of the main democratic principles and procedures, and sometimes the entire democratic regime. The main reason for this is probably profound citizen dissatisfaction with the economic and political performance of current democratic administrations in recently established democratic regimes. However, what both established and new democracies seem to be sharing is that their citizens are realizing that despite the democratic assertion that the people are the ultimate source of political authority, they are not exercising much of this power. At the same time, and considering that the democratic project has been mostly state-centered, both established and new democracies are suffering from the fact that the capacities of their states have diminished in recent decades and that an important part of what is relevant for politics and societies is occurring outside the realm of the state.

SEE ALSO

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

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