

Political Variables and State Legitimacy

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Abstract

State legitimacy is a measure of citizen's support for their institutions. Legitimacy is also a source of sustainable competitive advantage that protects states by making them less vulnerable to social, economic, and political turbulence. The level of support varies as a function of political variables such as national identity, political interest, representativeness of political elites, and political ideology. Our data was derived from the 2014 European Social Survey (ESS) on France, Germany, Spain, and the UK. Based on a sample of 9,151 citizens, the results show that political representativeness and national identity are the greatest influencers of state legitimacy. Political variables also tend to have similar effects on legitimacy across different states.

Keywords

Legitimacy, state, segmentation, public institutions, communication, comparative analysis.

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State legitimacy is a measure of the level of citizen's support for those that wield political power

1. Introduction

Income inequality is on the rise. Consequently, and following the 2007 economic crisis, structural changes were set in motion by the electoral pressure of individuals on their political leaders. This has caused change processes that, in some cases, have impacted the integrity of the states themselves (i.e. Brexit; independence of Catalonia).

Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) helps us understand these processes by establishing that the survival of organizations depends on their legitimacy. When organizations stop performing activities that are considered appropriate and desirable by their environment, they lose its support. In this view, one of the consequences of the crisis was the delegitimization of the states because of their inability to carry out initiatives to prevent or mitigate the economic downturn.

State legitimacy is a measure of the level of citizen's support for those that wield political power (Beetham, 1991; Easton, 1975; Gilley, 2006). It is important because legitimate states obtain better results (Díez-Martín, Prado-Román & Blanco-González, 2013) through increased access to essential resources (Cruz-Suárez, Prado-Román & Prado-Román, 2014; Pollack, Rutherford & Nagy, 2012). This happens because legitimate organizations are better able to influence individuals' behaviors (Choi & Shepherd, 2005; Grigoli & Mills, 2014). On the other hand, less legitimate states are vulnerable to citizen mobilization as well as social, economic, and political turbulence (Baum & Oliver, 1991; Blanco-González, Prado-Román & Díez-Martín, 2017). Even further, when states lose legitimacy, they tend to focus their actions on staying in power rather than effectively managing its institutions (Gilley, 2012).

Legitimacy is a sustainable competitive advantage (Oliver, 1997) that can be used by states to survive and grow (Díez-Martín et al., 2013; Grigoli & Mills, 2014; Prado-Román, Blanco-González, Díez-Martín & Payne, 2016). Understanding the factors that make up legitimacy is important in order to promote social equilibrium, economic robustness, competitiveness, and growth. Analyzing legitimacy allows states to design and implement effective political strategies, develop efficient social initiatives, and communicate in relevant ways. It is a robust information system on which political managers can base their decision-making (Blanco-González et al., 2017). States should pay attention to their legitimacy as a source of competitive advantage and use it as a mechanism to adapt to changes in the international arena (Prado-Román et al., 2016).

Previous research has explored in detail the measurement of state legitimacy, identifying its primary determinants (Gilley, 2006, 2012) and creating models that measure legitimacy in states with similar environments (Blanco-González et al., 2017). These studies have led the way to the analysis of new challenges in our understanding of state legitimacy. Previously, state legitimacy has been measured in aggregate form, interpreting each state's population as a homogeneous whole. We know this is not the case. In fact, during the crisis years heterogeneous social groups have risen to prominence within individual states. Individual social characteristics influence their legitimacy evaluations (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). What social profile characteristics promote positive evaluations of state legitimacy? Are there groups within a population that react more sensitively in their state legitimacy assessments? To answer these questions, one must segment the population under study. This way, we can generate indicators that will anticipate social, political, and/or economic change.

Academics find political factors to be the main determinants in situations similar to the study of state stability (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Evans & Whitefield, 1995; Lillbacka, 1999; Miller

The goal of the current study is to determine the influence of different social groups on state legitimacy

& Listhaug, 1999; Mishler & Rose, 1997, 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Norris, 1999; Vassilev, 2004). The literature mentions political factors such as political support, institutional trust, or participation in the public sphere. From these results, one may infer parallel influencing elements for state legitimacy. Therefore, the goal of the current study is to determine the influence of different social groups on state legitimacy. More specifically, we aim to: (i) identify how different social groups—as segmented by variables that are political in nature—influence perceptions of state legitimacy; (ii) contrast whether influencing factors impact legitimacy in the same way across different countries.

To achieve these goals, we structured the paper in the following manner. First, we define the concept of state legitimacy. Second, we describe the variables used to segment social groups and how they impact state legitimacy. These variables are: political interest, political representativeness, political ideology, and national identity. Third, we lay out the sample details and methodology. The study focuses on four countries that operate within the common economic, political, and social framework of the European Union (Germany, France, Spain, and UK), which enables us to perform a cross-national analysis of the effect of influencing variables on legitimacy. Finally, we interpret the results and explain what they mean for understanding the influence of social variables on state stability as well as their importance as an indicator in the formulation of national policies.

2. State Legitimacy and Political Variables

The relationship between political variables and stability is of great importance for states. Various studies have shown the effect of political factors on indicators of country stability (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Evans & Whitefield, 1995; Lillbacka, 1999; Miller & Listhaug, 1999; Mishler & Rose, 1997, 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Norris, 1999; Vassilev, 2004). At a basic level, political effectiveness can be conceptualized as the state's ability to keep working, in other words, to generate political stability. Fukuyama (2005) argues that one of the state's greatest strengths is its capacity to have a cohesive political system that will keep functioning or prevail over competing social structures amid socioeconomic change. Other scholars such as Anderson and Tverdova (2003), Henderson and Arzaghi (2005), Huntington (1968), or Seligson and Booth (2009) analyze the effect of governance quality, corruption control, rule of law, decentralization, federalism, or perceived representativeness on indicators of stability and/or trust such as legitimacy.

Academics studying Institutional Theory note that stability is one of the main characteristics of institutions. Achieving it depends in great measure on legitimacy (Díez-de-Castro, Díez-Martín & Vázquez-Sánchez, 2015). In this line of thought, the academic literature has also explored the influence of political variables on legitimacy. Baines, Worcester, Jarrett & Mortimore (2003) establish a way of developing political messages based on identifying segments within the population and quantifying the influence of political actions on state legitimacy. Gilley (2006, 2012) analyzes differences among legitimacy levels in countries with different levels of development in order to quantify the influence of macro variables on state legitimacy.

Previous research has identified political variables that have an effect on state legitimacy: political interest, political representativeness, political ideology, and national identity. A subset of this body of literature looks at the influence of specific political attitudes on state legitimacy. These academics argue that state legitimacy is determined by underlying individual attitudes related to political interest, degree of ease of participation in the public sphere, and efficacy (Baines, Harris & Lewis, 2002). In other words, the more involved someone is in politics, the more they are likely to view the state as legitimate. Similarly, Weatherford (1992)

We extract public data from the ESS for the year 2014 in Germany, France, Spain, and the UK

shows that in the US political interest and civic duty are strong influencers of individuals' interest in participating in the political system, which is a close predictor for legitimacy.

With respect to political representativeness, state and government legitimacy do not always overlap in democratic countries (as opposed to authoritarian states where they are one and the same). In some situations, state legitimacy appears to correlate with level of support for the government (Rose, 1994; Weatherford, 1987). In other cases, citizens seem to make a distinction in their legitimacy assessments (Lillbacka, 1999; Muller, Jukam & Seligson, 1982). Nonetheless, a global political evaluation still makes sense since state legitimacy depends on how well the state measures up to its obligations (Pogge, 2002; Frickel & Davidson, 2004).

Blanco-González et al. (2017) show that political ideology causes differences in state legitimacy evaluations. Citizens who support a political party that is in power see the state as more legitimate than those whose chosen party is in the opposition. In a similar vein, Gilley (2006) maintains that evaluations of legitimacy reflect support for ideological hegemony.

Finally, with respect to national identity, Snyder (2000) adds that a greater sense of national pride can help states become more legitimate as they become surrounded by a national halo. A significant portion of the literature on ethnic conflict notes the difficulties in building legitimate political systems for all constituents in "pluralistic" or "divided" societies. This makes them more prone to instability and conflict (Horowitz, 2000). This may explain why some regions have a greater propensity for highly legitimate states. Huntington (1996) proposes that, in countries within the Western culture area, certain regions inherit cultural values that instill perceptions of state legitimacy.

On the contrary, other regions may have deep-rooted divisions between state and society that impact legitimacy perceptions. Examples of this type of situation have been observed in the Middle East (Hudson, 1977), Latin America (Nolan-Ferrell, 2004), Africa (Englebert, 2000), Eastern Europe (Ramet, 1999), China (Zhong, 1996), or Asia (Compton, 2000). In consequence, the sense of national identity among different citizens of the same country is not homogeneous.

3. Sample and methodology

To measure legitimacy, we build an index following guidelines from highly-respected indexes that are utilized in academic research and publications, such as the University of Michigan's Consumer Sentiment Index (Vosen & Schmidt, 2011) or the Consumer Confidence Index (Kwan & Cotsomitis, 2006; Tsalikis & Seaton, 2007). The index has positive, negative, and neutral indicators and allows for longitudinal analysis (Prado-Román et al., 2016).

As indicators for state legitimacy, we adapt those proposed by Blanco-González et al. (2017) and Gilley (2006) along with the confirmation—based on Gilley (2006), Grimes (2008), and Rothstein (2010)—that results from social surveys can be used to measure state legitimacy since they contain social and political indicators.

Following Blanco-González et al. (2017), the data must first be homogenized to account for different measurement scales. All items are transformed into a 0-100 scale by applying base 10 logarithms (0 = minimum legitimacy, 100 = maximum legitimacy) or inverting their values (2 = no legitimacy, 1 = total legitimacy). The ratings are then weighted, averaged, and applied by dimension to create a weighted measure of state legitimacy. This allows for comparison between items and creates a robust index (Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson, 2009).

The sample used is part of the bi-annual European Social Survey (ESS) carried out by the Standing Committee for the Social Sciences of the European Science Foundation. The ESS aims to measure changes in attitudes and behavior patterns of European citizens over time, improve the quality of quantitative measurements, and establish solid social indicators that reflect the well-being of European countries. Samples are representative of all persons aged 15 and over resident within private households in each country, regardless of their nationality, citizenship, or language. Individuals are selected by strict random probability methods at every stage. Therefore, data quality is ideal for the construction of a legitimacy index.

To this end, we extract public data from the ESS for the year 2014 in Germany, France, Spain, and the UK. From this data, we select 20 items (Table 1) related to citizens' perceptions of legality, justification, and consent (2 items measure legality, 8 of them relate to justification, and 10 to acts of consent).

Table 1
Sample and Methodology for the State Legitimacy

Dimensions	Item	Initial scale	Final scale
Legality	Trust in the legal system	1 - 10	0 - 100
	Trust in justice	1 - 10	0 - 100
Justification	Satisfaction with your country's democracy	1 - 10	0 - 100
	Satisfaction with your country's economic situation	1 - 10	0 - 100
	State of education in your country	1 - 10	0 - 100
	Satisfaction with your country's government	1 - 10	0 - 100
	Trust in parliament	1 - 10	0 - 100
	Trust in political parties	1 - 10	0 - 100
	Trust in politicians	1 - 10	0 - 100
	State of health services	1 - 10	0 - 100
Consent	Participation in an election in the last 12 months	1 - 2	0 - 100
	Boycotted a product in the last 12 months	1 - 2	0 - 100
	Feeling of closeness with a specific political party	1 - 2	0 - 100
	Contact with public administration in the last 12 months	1 - 2	0 - 100
	Member of a political party	1 - 10	0 - 100
	Participated in a lawful public demonstration in the last 12 months	1 - 2	0 - 100
	Signed a petition in the last 12 months	1 - 2	0 - 100
	Voted during the last general elections	1 - 2	0 - 100
	Worked in an organization or association in the last 12 months	1 - 2	0 - 100
	Worked in a political party or action group in the last 12 months	1 - 2	0 - 100
SAMPLE 2014: France = 1917; Germany = 3045; Spain = 1925; United Kingdom = 2.264			

Source: Own elaboration by Blanco-González et al. (2017) and European Social Survey (2014).

We see that political interest, representativeness of the governing class, ideology, and national identity all have an impact on perceptions of state legitimacy

Common-sense segmentation requires the investigator to choose the most relevant variables and then classify them (Pulido-Fernández & Sánchez-Rivero, 2010). In this case, we based the choice of political variables on factors identified in the literature as possible influencers of legitimacy. The value of each of these variables was extracted from the ESS (Table 2).

Table 2
Segmentation Criteria for the State Legitimacy

Political Variables	Item
Political Interest	INTPOL. How interested in politics
Representativeness	REPR. The political system allows citizens to have a voice in government REPR. The political system allows people to influence politics REPR. Politicians worry about what people think
Ideology	IDEOL. Closeness to a political party IDEOL. Situation in left-right spectrum
National Identity	IDENT. Closeness to one's country

4. Results

Anova analysis of the state legitimacy variable showed the differing impact of the four political variables under study (political interest, representativeness, political ideology, and national identity) (Table 3). If the significance level is less than 0.05 the differences observed are dependent on the segmentation criteria.

Table 3
Anova Analysis of Legitimacy by Country

Type	FRANCE	GERMANY	SPAIN	UK
INTPOL. Interest in politics	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***
REPR. Representativeness	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***
IDEOL. Ideology	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***
IDENT. Identity	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***	0,000***
*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001				

Legitimacy scores for each of the countries as a function of the selected variables show that some groups are more sensitive than others to the actions of the state. Table 4 breaks up the results and indicates the level of impact for each variable in that specific segment. When the specific legitimacy impact is less than 5% of the global legitimacy impact we consider it to be stable; when it varies between 6% and 10% we add an arrow pointing up (increases legitimacy) or down (decreases legitimacy); when it varies between 11% and 25% we add two arrows; and when it varies more than 25% we add three arrows to denote the highest level of segment sensitivity.

Table 4
Results for Global Legitimacy Vs. Specific Legitimacy

VBLES	ITEMS	FRANCE			GERMANY			SPAIN			UK	
	LEGITIMACY	55.3	Variation		63.9	Variation		49.7	Variation		60.2	Variation
INTPOL.	Very close	56.0	1%	↑	66.6	4%	↑	47.1	-5%	↓	57.1	-5% ↓
	Quite close	56.8	3%	↑	66.6	4%	↑	50.8	2%	↑	61.9	3% ↑
	Not close	54.3	-2%	↓	63.1	-1%	↓	51.6	4%	↑	61.1	1% ↑
	Not at all close	50.9	-8%	↓	57.8	-10%	↓	39.4	-21%	↓↓	55.2	-8% ↓
REPRES.	Strongly Disagree	42.5	-23%	↓↓	51.3	-20%	↓↓	38.5	-22%	↓↓	45.6	-24% ↓↓
	Disagree	57.3	4%	↑	64.4	1%	↑	51.8	4%	↑	58.7	-2% ↓
	Neutral	65.8	19%	↑↑	71.8	12%	↑↑	61.5	24%	↑↑	67.9	13% ↑↑
	Agree	69.9	26%	↑↑↑	75.3	18%	↑↑	68.3	38%	↑↑↑	72.9	21% ↑↑
	Strongly Agree	64.8	17%	↑↑	73.7	15%	↑↑	65.9	33%	↑↑↑	75.0	25% ↑↑
IDEOLOG.	Left	49.8	-10%	↓	57.4	-10%	↓	36.8	-26%	↓↓↓	47	-22% ↓↓
	Left - Moderate	58.4	5%	↑	62.6	-2%	↓	43.8	-12%	↓↓	57.6	-4% ↓
	Neutral	56.0	1%	↑	64.9	1%	↑	51.8	4%	↑	60.4	0% =
	Right - Moderate	55.6	0%	=	65.8	3%	↑	60.8	23%	↑↑	65.6	9% ↑
	Right	48.8	-12%	↓↓	60.7	-5%	↓	57.9	17%	↑↑	61.0	1% ↑
IDENT.	Very close	56.0	1%	↑	66.5	4%	↑	54.0	9%	↑	63.4	5% ↑
	Close	56.2	2%	↑	63.9	0%	=	48.4	-2%	↓	62.0	3% ↑
	Not very close	45.8	-17%	↓↓	57.9	-9%	↓	39.6	-20%	↓↓	51.8	-14% ↓↓
	Not close at all	24.3	-56%	↓↓↓	48.3	-24%	↓↓	17.1	-66%	↓↓↓	35.2	-42% ↓↓↓

LEG.: State Legitimacy; VAR.: Variation of legitimacy as a function of the VS group of overall legitimacy.

↑↑↑ = VAR. > 25%; ↑↑ = VAR. > 10 %; ↑ = VAR. > 5 %;

↓↓↓ = VAR. > -25%; ↓↓ = VAR. > -10 %; ↓ = VAR. > -5 %;

If we look at results in terms of political variables, we see that political interest, representativeness of the governing class, ideology, and national identity all have an impact on perceptions of state legitimacy. Political interest has a moderate impact in all countries except Spain, where individuals that are not interested in politics show 21% lower legitimacy scores. In other words, Spaniards with little interest in politics consider their state institutions to be markedly less legitimate than those surveyed in other countries.

Representativeness of the political elites is a critical variable in the four countries. The greater the disconnect between politicians and a country's inhabitants, the lower its legitimacy (France: -23%; Germany: -20%; Spain: -22%; UK: -24%). On the contrary, the more they feel listened to, the greater their country's legitimacy (France: 17%; Germany: 15%; Spain: 33%; UK: 25%). These results show that the inhabitants of these countries do not really distinguish between the state and their political representatives, which in a way reflects democratic immaturity. Political decisions are going to be reflected in the country's legitimacy score.

Political ideology (left - right) does not have a great impact on legitimacy in France and Germany. In the UK, those that view themselves on the left of the political spectrum have 22% lower perceptions of legitimacy. Similarly, in Spain left-leaning citizens have 26% lower views of their state's legitimacy while right-leaning citizens have 17% higher legitimacy rankings. These results coincide with the political ideology of the governing parties in each of

State legitimacy—the level of support granted by a country's citizens to those that exercise political power—has proven to be an effective indicator for economic, social, and/or political instability

the two countries. In 2014, UK and Spain had conservative governments. As with the previous results, this relationship is also a sign of political immaturity.

National identity is a critical variable for legitimacy rankings. A high level of identification with one's country does not increase legitimacy in any of the four countries, but a lack of national identity does have a notable negative effect. In France, legitimacy falls by 56% to 24.3; in Germany it falls by 24% to 48.3; in Spain it falls by 66% to 17.1; and in the UK it falls by 42% to 35.2. In all the countries under study, a lack of national identity causes destabilizing reductions of legitimacy. Once again, the results show a lack of differentiation between institutions and nation which could be a symptom of lack of political maturity.

5. Conclusions and implications

According to Credit Suisse (2017) increased inequality and frustration with politicians who are unable to react to social change is causing middle-class voters to demand solutions in Western countries. Austerity measures and loose monetary policies have been particularly onerous on specific segments of the population. This has led to government turnover, a reduction of state legitimacy, and even to economic measures geared to satisfying the demands of a society that is unhappy and critical of the state.

Political phenomena such as the Donald Trump presidency in the US, Brexit, or increased voter turnout for extreme right or extreme left parties across Europe have been interpreted as a reflection of citizen's needs for different answers to their problems (aging population, low productivity, increased household debt). The political impact of this situation has created a new scenario where indicators of stability, such as state legitimacy, are of increasing importance.

State legitimacy—the level of support granted by a country's citizens to those that exercise political power—has proven to be an effective indicator for economic, social, and/or political instability (Gilley, 2012). The present study takes this idea even further by analyzing the influence of both political and sociodemographic, socioeconomic, and psychographic variables on state legitimacy. In addition, we perform a cross-country analysis to measure differences in the effect of differentiating variables across countries (specifically: France, Germany, Spain, and the UK).

This analysis shows that the representativeness of political elites and national identity are the most impactful political variables on legitimacy in all the countries under study. Representativeness can increase or decrease legitimacy. Those that do not see their political leaders as being representative register legitimacy losses of more than 20% in all four countries. When they do, legitimacy increases by over 15%. In this case, a global view of legitimacy would obscure these extreme variations which prove that residents of these countries do not differentiate between political and state institutions. In line with Rose (1994) or Weatherford (1987), this could be seen as a lack of democratic maturity.

National identity is another political variable that impacts state legitimacy. Across all four countries, those who do not feel close to their nation show lower legitimacy scores: with drops of 56% in France and 66% in Spain. These results highlight the importance of managing territorial conflict (for example, the Catalan conflict in Spain) and the emergence of nationalistic electoral agendas (for example, Angela Merkel's recent emphasis on messaging that positions Germany as a strong nation).

Ideology (left – right) is not a critical variable for France or Germany, but it is in Spain and the UK. In Spain, left-leaning survey respondents are linked to 26% lower legitimacy scores while

right-leaning residents view their states legitimacy as 17% higher. In the UK, political orientation on the left of the spectrum implies 22% more negative legitimacy views. Cross-country analysis of these differences shows that in France or Germany the ideology is not a determinant for legitimacy, in the UK only for left-leaning residents, while in Spain there is a left-right gap. This divide in Spain could be a signal that explains the emergence of new political parties that have achieved parliamentary representation.

The influence of political interest is moderate and only impacts state legitimacy in Spain where the legitimacy index for individuals with no political interest is 21% lower. Once again, these results seem to indicate that measuring legitimacy globally could lead to important oversights.

This research study is limited by the number of countries in the sample. It would be necessary to widen the cross-country analysis and increase the time horizon to see whether these results are stable over time. Different methodologies or political variables could be used to measure the impact of additional issues on state legitimacy such as attitudes toward immigration, change of government, the influence of regions, or economic situation.

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