

Studying Political Legitimacy; A Critical Reappraisal

Rudy B. Andeweg – Leiden University
(andeweg@fsw.leidenuniv.nl)



(Jacques-Louis David *La Mort de Socrate* 1787)

First draft

Paper for presentation to the conference on 'New Directions in Legitimacy Research', Netherlands
Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), October 31-November 1, 2014, Amsterdam,
The Netherlands

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Imagine that I am about to play truant (...), and the law and the government come and interrogate me: ‘Tell us, Socrates’, they say; ‘what are you about? Are you not by an act of yours to overturn us – the laws, and the whole state, as far as in you lies? Do you imagine that a state can subsist and not be overthrown, in which the decisions of law have no power, but are set aside and trampled upon by individuals?’ [... And] will they not say: ‘You, Socrates, are breaking the covenants and agreements which you made with us at your leisure, not in any haste or under any compulsion or deception, but after you have had seventy years to think of them, during which time you were at liberty to leave the city, if we were not to your mind, or if our covenants appeared to you to be unfair’.

Plato, *Crito* (trans. B. Jowett; www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext/99/crito10h.htm)

The story of Socrates’ trial is well known. In 399 BC, Socrates was found guilty of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens, and sentenced to death by drinking hemlock. While he awaited his execution, he was visited in prison by one of his friends, Crito, who had made arrangements for Socrates to escape and go into exile. Socrates refused, not because he feared that an attempt to break prison would be unsuccessful or would have dire consequences for Crito and himself, nor because he agreed with the sentence, but because he regarded the laws and government of Athens as legitimate¹. The story illustrates the importance of the belief that ‘a given rulership (...) is based on a good title by most men subject to it’ (Friedrich 1963, 234), of ‘the conviction on the part of the member that it is right and proper (...) to accept and obey the authorities’ (Easton 1965, 451). Without legitimacy, a government is either limited to do only what citizens agree with in the first place (and then a government is redundant) or it is condemned to rely solely on force (and then even an authoritarian government is not viable). This is the reason why politicians are so concerned about a perceived erosion of legitimacy: political legitimacy is a construct that explains why people obey the laws even when they do not agree with them and do not fear the consequences of disobeying them. This is ample reason for political scientists to spend so much time and energy to measure political legitimacy and to study its causes. This essay is not intended to cast doubt on the utility of the study of political legitimacy, but to critically reappraise the way in which we have conceptualized and studied political legitimacy.

The boundaries of the concept: agreement and compliance

As mentioned above, if Socrates had agreed with his jurors, the *Crito* would have been long forgotten. Legitimacy is an aspect of power, and if we accept Dahl’s famous definition, A has no power over B if she gets B to do something B was planning to do anyway. Nevertheless, most authors on legitimacy

¹ The relevance of the *Crito* dialogue was suggested to me by Willem Witteveen of Tilburg University. Willem was killed with his wife and daughter on July 17, 2014 while traveling on flight MH17 over Eastern Ukraine.

argue that some form of ‘agreement’ is inherent in the concept of legitimacy. For Beetham, for example, one of the components of legitimacy is that ‘the rules can be justified by reference to *beliefs shared by both dominant and subordinate*’ (Beetham 2013, 16, my italics). This agreement is not about the concrete laws and policies of the government, but rather about the appropriate qualities for the exercise of power, about the structure of power, etc. It gets more problematic with definitions such as Stillman’s who argues that ‘A government is legitimate if and only if the results of governmental output are compatible with the value patterns of society’ (Stillman 1974, 31). This does refer to agreement about specific measures, as when Stillman suggests that Roosevelt was less legitimate than Eisenhower because his New Deal policies were less compatible with the prewar value pattern of American society than with that value pattern after the war (pp.44-5). In recent years, Scharpf’s distinction between ‘input-oriented legitimacy’ (legitimacy derives from a decision by the majority of a community) and ‘output-oriented legitimacy (legitimacy derives from the capacity to solve problems) (Scharpf 1999, 6-42) has gained popularity, especially in studies of the legitimacy of the European Union (e.g. Jones 2009; Lindgren & Persson 2010). The concept combines effectiveness and agreement with the aims of the policies, as Weiler points out: ‘As long as the Union delivers ‘the goods’ - prosperity, stability, security – it will enjoy a legitimacy that derives from a subtle combination of success *per se*, of success in realizing its objectives, and of contentment with those results’ (Weiler 2012, 828). Apart from the ‘competence’ or ‘effectiveness’ component (which is often overlooked as a source of legitimacy), output legitimacy comes dangerously close to saying that subjects abide by rules because they agree with them. Standard measures of ‘input legitimacy’, however, are also contaminated by ‘agreement’. The ‘winner-loser gap’ that has been found in the answers to questions about, for example, satisfaction with the way democracy functions (Anderson et al 2005, 90-119; Linde & Ekman 2003) implies that the question in part also measures agreement with the policies pursued by the government of the day. This suspicion is reinforced by findings that the ‘winner-loser gap’ is more pronounced in majoritarian systems, where the contrast between agreement and disagreement is starker.

A second boundary problem regards the relationship between legitimacy and behaviour. If legitimacy is to explain ‘why people obey the law’ (Tyler 2006), then it is circular to include such behaviour into the concept of legitimacy itself. Yet, this is not uncommon. Beetham argues that ‘Power can be said to be legitimate to the extent that: [i...., ii...., iii] there is evidence of consent by the subordinate to the particular power relation’ (Beetham 2013, 15-6). This consent is expressed through swearing allegiance or taking part in an election (p.18), but also through obedience: ‘if the public expression of consent contributes to the legitimacy of the powerful, then the withdrawal or refusal of consent will by the same token detract from it. Actions ranging from non-cooperation and passive resistance to open disobedience and militant opposition on the part of those qualified to give consent will in different measure erode legitimacy, and the larger the numbers involved, the greater this erosion will be. At this

level, the opposite or negative of legitimacy can be called delegitimation.’ (p.19). In a similar vein, Gilley proposed both electoral turnout and payment of (easy to evade) taxes as behavioural indicators of legitimacy, before dropping them for methodological reasons (Gilley 2006).

The two indicators pose different problems: including tax payments and compliance/disobedience is simply confusing cause and effect. Participating in elections is more complicated: except under compulsory voting, it is not a form of compliance. Drops in turnout, together with declining party membership, increased ticket splitting and volatility, are indeed often cited as symptoms of eroding legitimacy (e.g. Schmitter & Trechsel 2004) and signs that ‘citizens are heading for the exits of the national political arena’ (Mair 2006, 44). While the trends, especially since the 1980s, are not in dispute, at least not for most countries, this interpretation of these trends is questionable. Inferring motives from behaviour is never straightforward, and here alternative explanations seem to be more plausible (Thomassen, Van Ham & Andeweg 2014, 39-67). With regard to turnout, it appears that the group of hard-core non-voters, who never participate, is quite small. We find many more occasional non-voters, and the reasons that they themselves offer for their abstention vary greatly, from nonpolitical reasons (forgot, lost registration card, was ill) to political reasons (wasted vote, not enough at stake or no meaningful choice (second-order elections!)). The decline in membership is by no means peculiar to political parties: trade unions, churches, service clubs, etc. are all suffering from the same fate, which is more appropriately identified as individualization than as delegitimation. It is even less clear why increasing electoral volatility and ticket-splitting point to a democratic malaise. Mair suggests that ‘inconsistency goes hand in hand with indifference’ (2006, 38), but in many countries the ideological and sociological differences between political parties are fading, making it increasingly hard for voters to make a choice – and at the same time making it easier for them to make a *different* choice in different elections. Rather than seeing this as a problem for democracy, it can more likely be argued that, freed from their subcultural shackles, individualized voters at last begin to behave as they were intended to by democratic theory.

The relationship between legitimacy and trust

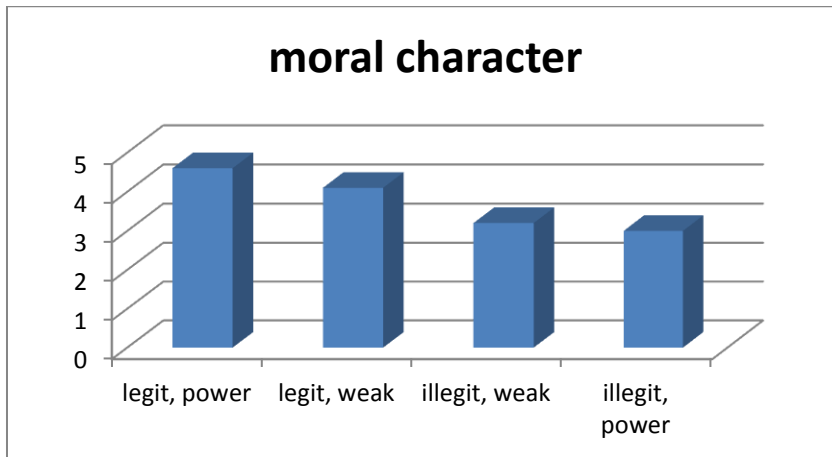
Curiously, political legitimacy is rarely studied directly, but primarily through proxies such as satisfaction with the functioning of national democracy and trust in political institutions such as the government or the judiciary, and political actors such as parties and politicians. The problems with ‘satisfaction’ are relatively well-known in the literature (e.g. Canache et al 2001; Linde & Ekman 2003). Here I focus on political trust. ‘Trust might be an indicator of legitimacy, be derived from it, and contribute to its reinforcement, but trust should not be confused with legitimacy’ (Linz, quoted in Dogan 1994, 305). The quote nicely illustrates how muddled the relationship between the concepts of

political legitimacy and political trust is: trust as indicator, as consequence, and as cause of legitimacy. Following Gamson (1968) and Easton (1965) legitimacy, support, and trust are treated as near synonyms: ‘(...) we rely on a straightforward but also very general definition of political support, also variously referred to as political trust or political legitimacy (...)’ (Anderson et al 2005, 19), or ‘Political trust means that the legitimacy of the political regime is acknowledged and that there is a high degree of willingness to accept the decisions of politicians and government agencies’ (Hooghe & Zmerli 2011,3). If political trust and legitimacy are not treated as synonymous, trust is often regarded as a subcategory of legitimacy, for example when trust is employed as the operationalization of the middle range on Easton’s dimension from diffuse to specific support (e.g. Norris 2011, 44); it denotes not the support for abstract constitutional principles or concrete policies, but the support for institutions and actors. Yet others see trust as the broader category. In his debate with Miller, Citrin for example argues that a decline in trust can indicate various things, only one of them being a decline in the legitimacy of the regime (Citrin 1974).

Socrates did not swallow the hemlock because he trusted the Athenian jurors who had sentenced him. Yet, in political science it is not common to see legitimacy and trust as two distinct variables. That approach is more often found in criminology and the sociology of law (as a footnote: it is surprising how little multidisciplinary collaboration exists in this field). ‘Legitimacy is a belief in the moral right of legal authorities to possess and exercise power and influence, while trust is a belief in how individual actors working for the institution perform their roles.’ (Jackson et al 2013,5; also see Hawdon 2008). The legitimacy of the police is measured by survey items such as ‘To what extent is it your duty to do what the police tell you even if you don’t understand or agree with the reasons?’; trust in the police is measured by items such as ‘Based on what you have heard or your own experience, how often would you say the police generally treat people in [country] with respect?’ (European Social Survey Round 5). In his 1984/1985 Chicago Study, Tyler found ‘perceived obligation’ and ‘support’ to be only weakly correlated, although both contribute to compliance with the law (Tyler 2006, 45-50).

In political science too, political trust has been found to correlate with compliance, especially with paying taxes (e.g. Levi & Stoker 2000, 491-3; Dalton 2004, 165-9), and with the acceptance of illegal behaviour (e.g. Mariën & Hooghe 2011). It could well be that political legitimacy and political trust independently contribute to obedience, but there is also a risk of a spurious correlation in the triangle between legitimacy, trust, and compliance. In psychological experiments, subjects were asked to rate the morality of a fictional university’s head treasury officer whose degree of power (‘a lot of restrictions on his authority’ vs. ‘can essentially make the decision without any restriction’) and degree of legitimacy (little experience, appointed by a family member vs. extensive experience, elected democratically) were manipulated. Figure 1 shows that the manipulation of legitimacy in particular

Figure 1: Impact of an official's power and legitimacy on judgments of his moral character



Source: Smith & Overbeck 2014, Figure 4.3

had an impact on the judgments of this fictional treasurer's moral character² (Smith & Overbeck 2014, 64-5). If we can equate 'moral character' with trustworthiness, it would appear that legitimacy produces trust. If this is indeed the causal relationship, of the two correlations with compliance that of legitimacy is probably real and that of trust is spurious. At the moment the ice is too thin for this to be more than conjecture, but the question is an important one to disentangle. It has been suggested that high political trust is not necessarily a good thing in a legitimate democracy: a certain level of mistrust can be considered healthy as it prompts citizens to monitor their political representatives closely and makes politicians aware that they are accountable (e.g. Rosanvallon 2008). Lenard (2008) refines the argument by arguing that it is valid only for *mistrust* (caution, doubt) as it fosters vigilance, but not for *distrust* (cynicism, suspicion) which fosters abstention. However, this whole argument is weakened if it can be shown that political trust has an independent and positive effect on compliance (Mariën & Hooghe 2011).

The Person-Positivity Bias

We seek to measure the legitimacy of the regime or of institutions within that regime; in other words: of collectives of political parties and of politicians. However, attitudes towards collectives or categories may differ from attitudes towards a collective's individual members. In one of the oldest studies in this field, LaPiere (1934) found that a Chinese couple he traveled with in the 1930s was well received in all but one of the many hotels and restaurants they visited. Yet, 90 percent of these same establishments replied that they would refuse to serve a Chinese couple when he wrote them a letter

² The experiment also manipulated the degree of transparency provided by the treasurer. For our purpose I report only the results for the 'low transparency' condition.

later. Various explanations have been offered for this striking incongruence between attitudes (as expressed when answering the letter) and behaviour (serving them when they showed up on their doorsteps), but a prominent one is that the answers to the letter referred to the category of Chinese people, and the hospitality was extended to individual Chinese people. The access to individuating information offered by meeting a specific person may set that person apart from the stereotype of the category to which that person belongs. However, the mechanism also works without individuating information: Critcher and Dunning (2013) found that a randomly selected individual student at one's university was thought more likely to give money to the homeless or engage in some other form of selfless behaviour than the university's student body in general. In principle, attitudes towards a member of a category can be both more positive and more negative than attitudes towards the category, but in all studies the attitude towards the individual is more positive: a 'person-positivity bias' (Sears 1983). It is not clear yet whether the bias is related to the distinction between categories and real human beings, as Sears suggests, or between categories and those individual elements (whether humans or organizations such as political parties) to which one is (ideologically) close (Nilsson & Ekehammar 1987).

The 'person-positivity bias' gets an additional edge in democratic politics. US hotel owners may not get to select their Chinese guests, but citizens are asked periodically to choose their representatives. Hence the well-known finding that Americans hate Congress, but love their own Congressman (Fenno 1975; but see Parker & Davidson 1979). Thus the latent tendency to evaluate individuals more positively is reinforced by individuating information (the election campaign!), and further strengthened by the circumstance that the individual is the citizen's own choice. Voters may even base their choice of a particular party or candidate wholly or partially on that candidate's or party's perceived trustworthiness. Yet, our surveys tend to ask indiscriminately about the trustworthiness of 'parliament', of 'political parties' and of 'politicians', and we ask respondents to react to statements such as 'Knowingly, politicians promise more than they can deliver', 'MPs don't care about the opinions of people like me', and 'Ministers are primarily working for their own interests'.

The scope of legitimacy.

In his studies of Dutch consociational democracy, Lijphart has drawn attention to the fact that protest tends to evaporate once a political decision is arrived at. In 1949, before a two-thirds majority of the Dutch Parliament had approved decolonization, only a small minority of the population agreed with the granting of independence to Indonesia, but after the vote there were no further protests or demonstrations (Lijphart 1966, 111-24, 247-9, 283-4). In 1964, a pirate commercial television station started broadcasting from a converted oil rig just outside territorial waters. Although a special antenna was needed to receive the broadcasts, they became very popular and surveys showed that 70 percent of

the population felt that the government should leave the illegal station alone. Yet, when the government nevertheless silenced the station, only 33 percent of the population disagreed with the measures taken (Lijphart 1975: 159-61). Lijphart attributed the acceptance of controversial government decisions to high legitimacy caused by the inclusiveness of consociational policy-making. In 2004, a law took effect to ban smoking in public places in the Netherlands. Compliance was, after a slow start, quite impressive. But when the ban was extended to bars and restaurants in 2008, there was widespread non-compliance, especially in small bars, and even intimidation of food and health inspectors visiting such bars. Although there are countries where smoking bans have been largely respected (Italy, Ireland), the Netherlands is not the only country with high non-compliance (e.g. several German Länder) (Nagelhout et al, 2011). Across countries, the primary motivation of those contesting the ban seems to have been that a smoking ban constitutes undue government interference with their personal life-style (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smoking_ban#Criticism_of_smoke-free_laws). Small bars in particular are regarded by customers as an extension of their living room, unlike workplaces and public buildings (where compliance rates are high).

This illustrative example serves to alert us that political legitimacy need not be general, but can be confined to a particular scope. Within that scope, the government is regarded as ‘in good title’ and should be obeyed, but outside that scope government interference is no longer regarded as justified. The scope of legitimacy is mostly ignored in the literature, with a few notable exceptions such as in Levi and Stoker’s concept of domain specificity of trust and trustworthiness judgments (Levi & Stoker 2000, 499) and in Hardin’s insistence that trust is not open-ended: ‘A trusts B *to do X*’ (Hardin 2002, 9; 60, my italics): ‘Only a small child, a lover, Abraham speaking to his god, or a rabid follower of a charismatic leader might be able to say “I trust you” without implicit modifier’ (p.9). The question is an important one, because the limits to the scope of legitimacy are subject to change. Economic policy was not a legitimate concern for Athenian democracy in Socrates’ days, but he was, in his own eyes legitimately, convicted on moral grounds. In modern times, individualization probably has narrowed political legitimacy’s scope considerably: there seems to be less and less acceptance of governments ruling on morality (sexual morality, religion, etc.). Rather than the overall decline in political legitimacy that preoccupies political scientists, we may be witnessing a decline of political legitimacy in particular spheres of human life.

Conclusion

In this essay I have criticized mainstream empirical studies of political legitimacy for

- * including agreement with the government's policies into the definition, which renders the concept meaningless;
- * including citizens' behaviour into the definition, which renders the study of legitimacy tautological;
- * overreliance on political trust as an indicator of political legitimacy, without sufficient attention to the conceptual and causal relationships in the triangle of legitimacy, trust, and compliance;
- * asking respondents in surveys about their satisfaction with or trust in collectives or categories, ignoring that they are likely to evaluate particular parts of such collectives differently (i.e. more positively).
- * Treating political legitimacy (and trust, satisfaction, support) as a blank cheque, ignoring that citizens are likely to consider the government legitimate in some domains but not in others, and that the boundaries of legitimacy's scope may shift over time.

Several caveats are in order. On the one hand, the above list is not exhaustive. I could have added the taking for granted of the legitimacy of the political community as such in the literature (although the Scottish referendum, the attempted referendum in Catalonia, and the multi-culturalisation of our societies should serve as warnings), several problems of measurement and scale construction, etc. On the other hand, taken together, the criticisms may also paint an unfairly negative portrait of the state of the discipline. First, these criticisms are not directed at any specific persons. I aim to provoke a debate about the current practice of studying political legitimacy, but it is a practice in which I am very much involved myself (e.g. Andeweg 1996, 2014). This is a devil's advocate's essay. Second, not all these criticisms apply to each individual study of legitimacy: studies that infer legitimacy from behaviour are in a minority, for example. Third, there are often good reasons for the current research practice. One of the problems in studying political legitimacy, for example, is the step from the micro to the macro level: how many citizens must believe the arrangements for governing to be legitimate for us to be able to say that the state is legitimate? A majority, most, all? How low must legitimacy be to say that democracy is at risk? Lacking such a touchstone, we compare current levels of legitimacy with levels of the past or levels elsewhere. This condemns us to analyzing comparative and longitudinal data, which considerably increases the costs of changing measurement items that are known to be deficient. Usually, we just hope that the bias resulting from defective measurement is a constant, and will not affect comparisons over time and across countries.

Repairs inspired by these criticisms need not automatically solve the problem that the political legitimacy crisis has become a political equivalent of the Loch Ness monster: despite the repeated failure of scientific expeditions to find evidence of the monster, politicians and pundits continue to believe in its existence. What do they see that we don't? Some suggested repairs may even increase the discrepancy between our data and public discourse: if we no longer measure evaluations of collectives, and differentiate between individual parties or politicians, the person-positivity bias leads us to expect an even rosier picture of the current state of political legitimacy. Distinguishing level and scope of legitimacy may lead to the conclusion that apparent declines of legitimacy are merely shifts in the boundary of legitimacy's scope, etc. Yet, it will contribute to a better understanding if we re-focus on the reason why we study legitimacy: to explain why citizens abide by rules with which they do not agree and which they could evade without too great a risk; to understand why Socrates did not follow Crito's advice. At the moment the state of affairs is too much that 'Legitimacy is the political scientist's equivalent of the economist's invisible hand: we know it exists as a force that holds societies together, but we can't give very satisfactory explanations of how to create it or why it is sometimes very strong and sometimes seems to disappear' (Stone 2012, 291).

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