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What makes authorities legitimate in the eyes of citizens? : an investigation of perceived legitimacy in different political regimes

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Abstract

The thesis ‘What makes authorities legitimate in the eyes of citizens? An investigation of perceived legitimacy in different political regimes’ presents a comparative study into political legitimacy. The thesis examines what factors contribute to perceiving political authorities as legitimate by individuals socialized in different political regimes. Using experimental vignettes and original survey data, the thesis investigates to what extent normative qualities of political authorities (moral features) play a role in citizens’ evaluations of these authorities. Moreover, this thesis challenges the claim that citizens in non-democratic regimes have unique or special expectations about political authorities. It does so by comparing the factors influencing perceived legitimacy of governments in different political regimes: two post-Soviet non-democracies (Russia and Ukraine) and old and new democracies in Europe (France, Netherlands, and Poland). The findings in all five countries support the theoretical model of a citizen who is concerned with both her personal material well-being and the fairness of authorities. The factor that had the largest positive effect on perceived legitimacy across countries was distributive justice—fairness in providing goods and services across the individuals in a society. Furthermore, respondents’ beliefs about what makes political authorities legitimate were similar across the five countries and suggest that for evaluating legitimacy, the output aspects of governing (e.g. welfare, order, and stability) are less important than the input (e.g. elections, trust, representation) and throughput aspects (e.g. fair procedures, legality, transparency, and integrity of authorities).

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