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Chapter 6. General discussion and conclusions

What makes political authorities legitimate? The studies presented in this thesis indicate that in the eyes of citizens, the moral standing of the authorities is a very important characteristic that contributes to the willingness to voluntarily transfer power to them. All three studies showed that citizens socialized in different political regimes do not only care about personal rewards that they receive from the authorities, but also care about whether the authorities distribute goods and services fairly across society, use just and transparent procedures, and represent integrity, honesty, and reliability. The results of the studies showed that most citizens see acquiring power in a legal manner (through a victory in free and fair elections) as the basis for the voluntary transfer of power (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5). Moreover, citizens are sensitive to how the rule is exercised, specifically if the decisions about ‘who gets what, when, and how’ are taken in a just way (Chapter 3, 4, and 5). Importantly, distributive justice had the largest positive effect on perceptions of legitimacy of authorities in both the experimental (operationalized as the distribution of help to the victims of flood in Chapter 3) and the correlational study (operationalized as working for the common good rather than small elite in Chapter 5).

Summary of results

This thesis aimed to contribute to understanding of the criteria used by citizens to judge political authorities’ legitimacy, to comparison of ideas about legitimacy in different political regimes, and to theory-building and methodology of research into political legitimacy. The three empirical studies reported in this thesis were conducted in five countries to achieve these aims. All of them provided results and insights that may guide future research of perceived legitimacy.

Main results

In the first empirical study of this thesis, the vignette experiment tested the causal relations between perceived legitimacy and instrumental and normative factors. The findings supported a model of a citizen that is concerned with both his/her personal

material well-being and fairness of institutions when evaluating political authorities. The results confirmed that citizens' evaluations of authorities become more positive with provision of instrumental incentives (personal positive outcome), but also that just behaviour on the side of political authorities (distributive and procedural justice) can do the same. Moreover, fair distribution of help was the most important factor influencing perceived legitimacy of the hypothetical government, showing that the extent of fairness in 'who gets what' aspect of politics is the core concern of citizens when granting legitimacy to authorities. Furthermore, citizens that experienced fairness of procedures—the possibility to consult the authorities and voice opinions—expressed higher level of legitimacy than citizens who did not. This finding illustrates that legitimacy is based not only on the evaluation of 'who gets what', but also on 'how' the decisions are taken. In this case, whether the hypothetical government consulted the citizens about their situation made a difference for their perceptions of legitimacy. The same patterns were observed across the regime types in which participants were socialized. In other words, the results showed support for the proposed theory of perceived legitimacy across different regimes.

The second study of this thesis explored the conceptions of legitimacy among respondents socialized in different political regimes. The analysis of answers to an open question about the most important characteristics of legitimate authorities showed that these characteristics are very similar across countries: similar concepts and themes were used to express what the characteristics of legitimate authorities are. These findings supported the view that normative characteristics of political authorities, and less the outcomes provided by them, are important for citizens when granting legitimacy. The analysis revealed that characteristics of authorities belonging to the input and throughput dimensions were mentioned more often by respondents than characteristics belonging to the output dimension. In other words, with regards to legitimacy, respondents were concerned about the way power is obtained by authorities, emphasized free and fair elections, and underlined the role of trust (input). Moreover, they were also concerned with the way power is exercised and listed personal characteristics and modes of conduct that they expected from authorities (throughput: fairness/justice, impartiality, legality, transparency, and mechanisms of checks &

balances). This implies that just winning elections does not yield a constant and lasting level of perceived legitimacy. To sustain legitimacy, political authorities need to show procedural and distributive fairness. This study, thus, corroborated the results of the vignette experiment and extended them with additional normative criteria that were listed as important for legitimacy by the respondents.

The correlational third study explored the factors influencing the perceived legitimacy of real institutions. Results supported the hypothesis that how political institutions perform matters the most for the perceptions of their legitimacy. The perception that executive institutions work for the interest of the whole society rather than for a small elite was consistently the strongest predictor of their perceived legitimacy. This indicated that distributive justice in the provision of outputs is important for the evaluation of real—not only hypothetical—institutions. This further corroborated the results of the vignette experiment, which showed the positive influence of fair distribution on perceived legitimacy as well. Moreover, in all countries the ability of parliaments to control governments as well as the quality of representation offered by political parties consistently explained perceived legitimacy of parliaments. This shows that respondents across countries (1) valued effective procedures serving as checks and balances on the executive institutions and (2) perceived parliaments as more legitimate if they thought that political parties are responding to the needs and values of citizens. These two findings show the importance of throughput and input for the evaluation of political institutions.

The results of all three studies show that the most important factors influencing perceived legitimacy across all five countries are distributive justice and procedural justice. In the experiment, distributive justice was operationalized as fair distribution of help. In the correlational study, the variable that measured distributive justice was the extent to which the executives were perceived as working for the benefit of all citizens rather than for the benefit of small elite. In both studies, the effects of fairness in the allocation of goods and services on perceived legitimacy were the largest of all tested effect. In the study of the conceptions of legitimacy, respondents expressed the importance of distributive justice by referring to acting for the common good or in the interest of all citizens. Words such as fairness/honesty and

equality, which are linked to the issues surrounding distributive justice, were also named frequently as important characteristics of legitimate authorities.

Also procedural justice had consistent positive effect on perceived legitimacy. It was operationalized in the experiment as giving voice to the citizens and in the correlational study as fairness of elections, checks and balances between different institutions, and equal treatment of citizens. Respondents expressed the importance of procedural justice in their answers to the open question about characteristics of legitimate authorities by referring to the rules that need to be followed to obtain power (free and fair elections), but also to checks and balances of authorities' conduct while in power, such as transparency, fairness, impartiality, and equal treatment. The experiment found a significant interaction between distributive and procedural justice in four out of five cases. The interaction showed that procedural justice increased perceived legitimacy when distributive justice was present. In other words, if distribution of government's help was unfair, then having the opportunity to meet with the governmental commission and participate in a discussion either did not increase perceived legitimacy of the government or increased it to a smaller extent. A possible interpretation of this interaction is that people expect fair procedures to lead to fair distribution of help and goods and services. Only then substantial increases in authority's legitimacy can be gained.

Following these consistent results it can be concluded that if authorities would like to increase their perceived legitimacy, they should strive to achieve distributive justice by including as many citizens as possible in the fair distribution of goods and services. Moreover, the results also suggest that a good way to achieve distributive justice is the application of procedural justice: impartiality, transparency (understood both as openness and no abuse of office for personal gain), giving voice to all the concerned parties, following laws, and guaranteeing equal treatment.

Furthermore, the responses to the open question exploring the ideas about legitimacy showed that in both democratic and non-democratic regimes students' conceptions of legitimacy and democracy were intertwined. For example, free and fair elections, which are a crucial component of the concept of democracy, were almost uniformly considered the basis for legitimate rule. Another component of democracy,

the rule of law, was also emphasized as a very important characteristic of legitimate authorities. The results of the three studies also suggest that it is possible that citizens in different regimes are primarily concerned with distributive and procedural fairness of regimes rather than democracy as an abstract form of government. In other words, citizens in their evaluations might focus on more specific desirable behaviors and characteristics of authorities and institutions rather than an aggregate judgment of the level of democracy. This seems plausible, because understanding of political processes in terms of fair division of resources and impartial treatment is more intuitive and less abstract than understanding in terms of presence or absence of democracy. In short, it does not matter whether we call a regime democratic or not, as long as the authorities and institutions treat people fairly. The primacy of concerns about distributive and procedural justice could thus explain the similarities in the conceptions of legitimacy in democracies and hybrid regimes.

Differences between individuals socialized in different regimes

Contrary to expectations, the differences in legitimacy evaluations due to respondents' socialization in different political regimes were not large. However, each study showed several differences that are worth elaborating on as they might provide a starting point for further investigation.

In the first study, the main differences identified between democracies and hybrid regimes were in the magnitude of the effects of distributive justice. In both hybrid regimes, Ukraine and Russia, the effect of distributive justice was significantly higher than in the democratic regimes. The result implies that fair distribution of help by the government might be a more salient issue in these hybrid regimes. This could be due to socialization: the communist legacy may have fostered higher expectations on the side of citizens to receive goods and services from state institutions. It could also be a reflection of the urgency of the problems connected to distribution of goods and services in Ukraine and Russia due to wide spread corruption and stark inequalities. The comparative analysis showed also that procedural justice had a significantly larger effect on perceived legitimacy in Ukraine than in the other analysed countries. This fits with the current developments in Ukraine: the waves of protests in 2004 and 2013

show that especially young citizens want to have their voice heard and that they are ready to express their discontent in mass demonstrations. The underestimation and disregard of the citizens' voices by the authorities in Ukraine led to an escalation of the conflict between citizens and the state.

The second study explored differences in the conceptions of legitimacy of respondents socialized in different political regimes. Although public opinion surveys and literature on regime survival suggested that the basis of legitimacy in non-democracies like Russia might be different than in stable democracies, this was not confirmed by the results of this study. Output—the aspect of legitimacy that included answers such as welfare, order, stability, acting for the common good, and answers expressing the power to execute decisions—was not the most important aspect of perceived legitimacy in any of the analysed countries. It does not mean, however, that outputs are not important for other kinds of judgments about political authorities (e.g. support) and for behaviour towards them (e.g. obedience, voting). It merely shows that the output aspects of governing are not as essential when evaluating legitimacy as input and throughput. Moreover, the analysis showed that French respondents emphasized input—elections, representation, and citizen participation—as a priority requirement for legitimate authorities more often than respondents from other countries. The Dutch respondents showed more emphasis on throughput, which included such characteristics of political conduct as impartiality, transparency, and professionalism.

Also, the second study showed that transparency was the most frequently named characteristic of legitimate authorities in both the Netherlands and Ukraine. However, the content of this category varied. Respondents in the Netherlands often referred to the category of transparency with words such as transparency and openness. In contrast, respondents in Ukraine often referred to transparency with words expressing concern with corruption. This shows that the notion that transparency is important for legitimacy is shared, but that what needs to be done to either achieve it (in Ukraine) or sustain and improve it (in the Netherlands) may differ depending on the current state of transparency in a given country and the most urgent political issues in the eyes of citizens. Respondents from Ukraine (and Russia) might have been mainly concerned with the level of the abuse of power for personal gains whereas respondents

in the Netherlands used words describing the need of transparency in terms of acting in a visible, open manner that can be observed and checked by citizens.

In the second study, two other differences were found between post-communist countries and old democracies. First, although input was important in each country, respondents from the post-communist countries emphasised trust/support more than those from France and the Netherlands. In France, elections were the most frequently mentioned characteristic of legitimate authorities among the answers concerned with input. Second, a larger emphasis was given to citizen participation and consultation in the old democracies than in the post-communist countries. This finding is in line with earlier studies (see Chapter 1, pp.39-40) that have linked the experience of communism with the lack of willingness to engage in politics and social activism (on a daily basis) in the post-communist era.

The third study found that institutions in old democracies were on average perceived by respondents as more legitimate than institutions in the new democracy and hybrid regimes. Moreover, the extent to which general views about the ideal political system (beliefs about how the system should work) explained perceived legitimacy of institutions depended on the type of institutions and on regime type. For respondents from democracies, some variance in perceived legitimacy of the legislative and judicial institutions was explained by different preferences for the arrangements within the political system (although not the type of the political system itself). However, these preferences did not explain much of perceived legitimacy of the executive institutions. The perceived legitimacy of the executive institutions was mainly explained by assessment of their performance. The opposite pattern was observed for hybrid regimes: the general predictors were more important in explaining perceived legitimacy of the executive institutions. Another difference between democracies and hybrid regimes was that in hybrid regimes perceived legitimacy of institutions was influenced by whether respondents viewed democracy as the best system, whereas in democracies this predictor was not significant. Also, among Russian respondents perceived legitimacy was associated with preferences for democracy and ideas on how the system ought to work, as well as the evaluations of institutional performance.

In sum, the differences in what makes authorities legitimate in the eyes of citizens from analysed countries were mainly differences of emphasis rather than of kind. Distributive justice was the strongest predictor of perceived legitimacy in all countries, but it was especially strong in the case of Russia and Ukraine—two countries where income inequality and the oligarchic appropriation of state resources are of biggest concern. This links with the finding that requirement for transparency of political authorities was often expressed by phrases such as ‘not corrupt’ in Ukraine and Russia. In other words, the results from hybrid regimes indicate that respondents recognize that the requirement of fair distribution cannot be met without getting rid of corrupt practices of political authorities. Moreover, stronger emphasis on trust and support in post-communist countries suggests that the process of building a trust-based relation between the citizens and political authorities might be ongoing in Poland, Ukraine, and Russia and that relying on elections as a source of input legitimacy, although necessary, might not be a sufficient condition for achieving full legitimacy.

Theoretical and methodological contributions

This thesis focused specifically on one level of analysis of legitimacy, namely the individual level. Taking this perspective contributed to the development of the concept of legitimacy in several ways. First of all, exploring how individuals think about political legitimacy and what criteria they use to evaluate the legitimacy of political authorities informs us about the ideals that people have regarding those who rule over them. In other words, these studies contributed to our understanding of what individuals think about legitimacy and what are the factors that they focus on when evaluating whether the authorities deserve to have power transferred to them. Moreover, understanding the conception of legitimacy that citizens have and its similarities and differences to the conception of legitimacy held by the elites, rulers, and scholars can contribute to the research of the effects of what is known as legitimation strategies used by the authorities. Understanding the normative expectations from legitimate authorities on the part of citizens is necessary to know whether the legitimation offered by the authorities is in fact congruent with what citizens expect from them. By checking whether the values promoted by the authorities are compatible with the

expectations on the moral standing of authorities we can arrive at a more complete assessment of legitimacy of political regimes.

Secondly, the studies presented in this thesis showed that finding out what criteria citizens use and especially what normative factors they take into account when judging political authorities, helps to sharpen the distinction between the concept of support and legitimacy. Making this differentiation is difficult and this study represents only one of the steps towards achieving it. The research presented here compared instrumental and normative factors' influence on judgments about political authorities and showed that the proposed definition of perceived legitimacy as based on the normative evaluations is a useful definition. Therefore, this research contributed to the pursuit of a more precise delineation of the meaning of legitimacy. This is necessary, if legitimacy is to be considered a distinct concept with explanatory value, which adds to the understanding of mechanisms behind the transfer of power from citizens to authorities.

Another theoretical issue that this thesis aimed to illuminate was the effect of (outcome) dependence on perceived legitimacy. Although dependence was effectively manipulated in the experimental vignette, its effects on perceived legitimacy were not consistent across five countries (Chapter 3). Contrary to the hypothesis derived from system justification theory that dependence on political authorities increases perceived legitimacy, the main effects of dependence showed that being dependent on the government's help decreased perceived legitimacy in the Netherlands, Ukraine and Russia. In Poland, the effect of dependence was not consistent and in France not significant and very small. Similarly, the results of the correlational study did not show clear patterns in the effect of dependence (operationalized as socio-economic status) on perceived legitimacy of different political authorities. In most cases its effect on perceived legitimacy was not significant and the direction of the effect was not always the same. Therefore, the prediction of system justification theory about the role of dependence in perceived legitimacy was not supported. Further cross-cultural investigation might explain why the effects of dependence found here are opposite to the predictions of system justification theory.

Finally, the vignette study contributed to the methodology of legitimacy. The experimental vignettes designed for this research project successfully manipulated the factors that were supposed to affect perceived legitimacy. Moreover, the vignettes allowed for conclusions about the causal links between the variables included in the model. In addition, the scale developed to measure perceived legitimacy in the vignette experiment showed high consistency and was a reliable measure across all five cases. In other words, the questions used to measure perceived legitimacy correlated strongly and loaded on one factor. Therefore this scale seems like a good tool for operationalizing perceived legitimacy that goes beyond trust and support.

Implications for further research

This thesis examined theoretically prescribed factors that have been claimed to influence perceived legitimacy and also explored what other factors might be important to citizens when granting legitimacy to political authorities. Respondents identified many aspects related to the exercise of power that they find crucial for legitimacy. On the basis of these results, the next step in researching legitimacy on the individual level could be testing of the causal links between these additional criteria of evaluation (e.g. aspects of elections, degree of corruption) and perceived legitimacy. The method of vignette experiments (or factorial survey) seems to be a suitable tool to further the understanding of the mechanisms behind legitimacy granting. Studies that include additional factors influencing perceived legitimacy could contribute to advancing theory of perceived legitimacy. Moreover, testing the same model in other countries and with different samples can further inform us about its strengths and shortcomings.

For the particular purpose of this study, student samples were used to explore differences across the regime types. Consequently, this study has its limitations. First of all, it is not clear whether the differences and similarities between regimes would be larger or smaller if samples used in the study would be drawn from different populations. One can imagine that characteristics of a particular sample might affect the criteria used to evaluate political authorities. For example, other potential homogenous groups from which samples could be drawn to study legitimacy are police corps and militaries. However, these elite groups differ from students (and other groups

within society) in several ways. They are often self-selecting to join these institutions, because they have a particular set of values and a specific idea about legitimacy of authorities. Moreover, they are trained and obliged to serve their country and be loyal to the state. Therefore, we might find that the conceptions of legitimacy differ either more or less across countries, if one uses samples of police or military rather than samples of students. Furthermore, these differences would be due to the particular characteristics of individuals joining police or military and specific effects of these institutions rather than general political socialization process in a particular regime. Also, there is some evidence that students' views are more representative of the public than the elites (see Chapter 2). By the same token, using samples of lower educated people across countries might yield different results and show either larger or smaller differences in what characteristics of political authorities are important across these regimes. In this case, however, larger cross-country differences in ideas about legitimacy might be attributed, for example, to the quality of lower education in a particular country (e.g. the quality of lower education in the Netherlands might be better than the quality of lower education in Ukraine) than to socialization in a particular regime. Therefore, for the purpose of testing the assumption that political socialization in different regimes affects ideas about legitimacy, student samples were suitable.

Nevertheless, using student samples might also affect the scope of cross-country differences detected in the study of legitimacy. One could assume that being educated for certain number of years and reaching the undergraduate level of studies might lead to a uniform idea about what legitimate authorities are like. This might be partially true as the differences in the ideas about legitimacy and in the factors contributing to legitimacy of authorities found in my studies were not large. Following similar steps of education could make the ideas about legitimacy converge and as mentioned in Chapter 2.2 students in general have more sophisticated ideas and more knowledge about political systems than other social groups. However, there are two reasons to believe that the detected similarities are not entirely due to the fact of using students in particular. Firstly, even scholars of legitimacy within one university often disagree on what legitimacy is, what dimension it includes, and what factors influence

it. This was also demonstrated in Chapter 1, where the diverse definitions and scholarly understandings of legitimacy were discussed. For this reason, it is unlikely that being a student is fully responsible for rather similar understanding of legitimacy across the regimes. Secondly, there are previous studies that suggest that students' political views are distributed similarly to the views of general public (Chapter 2), therefore there is no clear a priori reason to believe that all students across countries have the same views about legitimacy. This does not mean that comparing samples drawn from different populations across countries would not yield valuable results. On the contrary, comparisons of ideas about legitimacy between different social groups from democratic and non-democratic regimes can be very informative, provided the studies control for the factors relevant for the particular question of interest.

Another way of expanding on this research would be to conduct similar studies in different populations within one country (elites, students, workers, different ethnic groups). A comparison of the ideas of different groups within societies about what constitutes legitimacy and testing the effect of the same factors in these groups might illuminate societal cleavages and political polarization. A study exploring differences within one society could include different social groups and could fill the divide between research on legitimation strategies used by political elites and research of the perceptions of these authorities by citizens. By identifying what factors influence perceived legitimacy according to the elites and comparing these factors to other groups within society, we could learn whether there is a disparity between the conceptions of legitimacy of those with power and those who are influenced by it. In other words, we could learn to what extent the elite's strategies resonate with citizens or particular groups of citizens.

Furthermore, identifying the mechanisms that lead to formulating judgments about distributive justice and discovering how the conceptions of distributive justice might differ between diverse groups within and across societies might be a fruitful avenue for future research. Since fairness of distribution was the strongest predictor of perceived legitimacy, better understanding of fairness and how citizens arrive at their moral assessments of political authorities may contribute to the understanding of legitimacy.