

# What is legitimacy and why is it important politics essay



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One critical question in the area of politics is “ Who have the right to own and exercise state power?” There would be only two different answers. One is “ who know best how to use power”, while the other one is “ who directly influenced by the power”. The first answer is the reply from Divine right of kings, Vanguard party or political elites, while the late one would be the answer from democracy.

So before looking into the topic of legitimacy, we should first understand the concept of state power, or says authority, because it is what regimes who hold legitimacy claim to have.

Tracing back to the theory of Max Weber (1997), his research found that, the existence of each regime constructed by “ command” and “ obedience” are “ induced by a belief in their existence”, and such belief is so called legitimacy. In other words, one may obey a regime because one believes in its legitimacy, and recognizes the status of the regime.

According to Weber, the authority is power accepted as legitimate by those subjected to it. He identified three types of authority. The first one, traditional authority, is a form of leadership in which the authority is largely tied to tradition or custom. Leaders have a traditional and legitimate right to exercise authority. It gives a rise to patrimonial and feudalistic systems, such as monarchies. Second, charismatic authority is found in a leader whose mission and vision inspire others. Faithful obedience to the charismatic leader and its legitimacy is based on belief. They are usually instilled with divine or supernatural powers, such as a religious prophet (e. g. Jesus in Christianity). The third, rational-legal authority is empowered by a formalistic

belief of legality and rationality. Under such condition, people obey the regime because of belief in law, but not sensible faith or worship. The authority sustains by rules, process and institution, not on individual. So it has less chance to be abused. If an official abuse his power, people can have right to refuse to obey. Legitimacy may be based on traditional, charismatic or rational-legal authority, although rational-legal authority is the most common basis of legitimacy in modern societies. But these three authorities are ideal types, that means the regimes in reality have “ mixed” component of legitimacy, but not “ pure”.

### Importance of legitimacy

To decide whether a regime own legitimacy, it does not depend on the claim of legal basis by ruler himself, but depends on whether the majority of population really recognize the regime. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that why legitimacy would always relate to democracy. The idea of legitimacy shows that the basis and foundation of the government come from public’s support is the only source of government power.

Legitimacy is important for all regimes. Legitimacy sustains political stability as it establishes the reasonableness of a regime, or says, provide reason for the regime to exist. That is why Weber point out that regime must arouse legitimacy belief of the people if they tend to maintain their rule.

### Ways to acquire legitimacy

Election, a significant element of democracy, is very important in the process of legitimization. Authoritarian regimes also tend to proceed election, even

non-competitive election. It is because election contributes to provide justification for the existence of a regime, thus consolidates its legitimacy. (Heywood, 2002) Voting preference directly shows the public opinion and makes decision toward particular ruling group or party, what is the actual meaning of election. In addition, election encourages citizens to participate in politics and help regime to obtain the active consent of people.

Another tool for regime to obtain legitimacy is constitution. Being a set of rules which lays down a framework in which government and political activity are conducted, its legitimization function can be analyzed on two sides. First, constitution is almost a prerequisite for a state to be recognized by other states, where the external legitimacy comes from. On the other hand, constitution can be used to promote respect and compliance among the domestic population, thus building up internal legitimacy.

Similar to the constitution mentioned before, assemblies (or councils) can be a tool to build legitimacy. Assembly enacts legislation, act as a representative body, it forces government to respond to popular demands. As assembly is a linkage between the government and the public, so it is also a communication channel to support as well as maintain ruling regime. It encourages the public to see the system of rule as 'rightful'.

From Samuel Huntington's points of view (1993), a regime with strong legitimacy must have three kinds of legitimacy. The first one is ideological legitimacy, that is, the value proposition of regime must be generally, voluntarily recognized by the people. Enforced ideological indoctrination is difficult to sustain such kind of legitimacy. The second one is procedure

legitimacy. The formation, change and operation of regime must be checked by citizen's vote. The ruling authority is limited and restricted by constitution or legal procedures. The third is performance legitimacy, which means that a regime supported by people should have satisfied performance.

For a regime that only based on single legitimacy, if her performance is unsatisfied, people may question the value and procedures which the regime based on, thus legitimacy crisis would occur. Therefore, he stated that economic crisis is a political barrier that difficult for authoritarian regimes to come across.

Take the legitimacy crisis of communist state as an example. In contrast to the capitalist camp, the value proposition of these communist states is Marx's theory on socialism and communism. Marxist theory criticized the irrationality, unfairness and exploitation of capitalist system, therefore such communist regimes are widely recognized by lower classes during the revolution or establishment of countries, the people's belief provided a strong legal foundation for these countries. However, there is a huge difference between theory and reality. The centralized political system and planned economy showed various obvious shortcomings, such as totalitarian rule, political privileges and political struggles. It led to the legitimacy crisis, or says, crisis of faith, of people toward socialism/communism. To a large extent, such crisis directly led to Revolutions of Eastern Europe, and these countries had to rebuild their legitimacy based on democratization.

In the case of People's Republic of China, before the reform and opening-up policies in China started in late 1970s, the ruling legitimacy of the

Communist Party of China mainly depended on ideology. CPC promoted Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, socialism and communism to people through propaganda machine and introduced political movements, such as Great Leap Forward and Anti-right campaign. Apart from ideological legitimacy, there are different sources for CPC to gain legitimacy, such as performance (industrial and economic development in 1950s) and charismatic attraction (Mao Zedong), but the ideology was still the most important component of the legitimacy of CPC. But such policies seriously damaged the social-economic development and political stability of China; if condition was worsening the ruling party would likely face legitimacy crisis. As a result, the main stream policy of CPC changes from class struggle to economic development, tried to enhance performance legitimacy to recover the problem of ideological legitimacy and procedure legitimacy. Therefore, GDP-a quantified index of economic development-is so important for CPC. China demands increase in GDP, while CPC demands legitimacy at the same time.