

# Researching State Legitimacy: A Political Approach to a Political Problem

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State legitimacy underpins power relations. It is an important concept for understanding power and politics, yet research on it has been surprisingly apolitical. Research has focused on measuring legitimacy and its sources at narrow points in time, at the expense of explaining how changes in legitimacy happen, and the people, ideas and political processes behind them. This paper carves a path through the sprawling debate on the meaning and measurement of state legitimacy, and sets out a political approach to researching it. Explaining legitimation and de-legitimation requires attention to political structures, ideas and agency – in particular, to the expectations established through the social contract, the nature of the political settlement, and how legitimacy claims are made and contested in public discourse. The paper provides an analytical framework that applies this political approach to a key question for state-building practitioners and legitimacy scholars: whether, when and why service delivery supports or undermines state legitimacy.

### What legitimacy is, and what it's not

In its basic interpretation, state legitimacy means **citizens believe in the state's basic right to rule** over them and are willing to defer to it (Gilley, 2009). It is an elusive phenomenon: researchers cannot observe it directly; they can only observe how it reveals itself through thoughts or actions. Yet legitimacy is an important concept because it is primarily concerned with how actors or institutions accrue and maintain power. Studying legitimacy helps us understand the circumstances under which the use of power is willingly, as opposed to coercively, accepted (Gilley, 2009). It draws our attention to the accord between rulers and ruled, or dominant and subordinate, and asks us to pay attention to the terms of that accord – why unequal power relations are accepted by the subordinate, and what they might expect in return (Coicaud, 2002).

More specifically, legitimacy is popular approval of the state's 'rules of the game', or the system of rules and expectations on which government actions are based. It is distinct from approval of government actions, from confidence in the state's capacity to uphold the social contract, and from trust that the state's institutions will fulfil their obligations. Rather, legitimacy is the social rightfulness of the rules by which those institutions operate.

### Three key questions

**What is being legitimised?** In any given context, the state might be viewed as a functional apparatus, an individual leader, a system of rules, or a collective national identity. An empirical approach to state legitimacy implies not adopting an externally imposed **view of what the state is, or what it means**. Further, citizens may view the state's various institutions differently, and their views of specific institutions may or may not signify or add up to the state's legitimacy as a whole.

**On what basis?** A legitimate state is one that uses power in justifiable ways. Justifiability is context-specific, and **depends on social norms**. Studying state legitimacy means studying those norms – the moral criteria against which the state is judged – and how far it fulfils those criteria. It is not about making assumptions about what sorts of institutions should be legitimate, but instead discovering the underlying moral principles that make them legitimate in any given setting.

**By whom?** Legitimacy beliefs may vary among population groups, and therefore also geographically. Likewise, not all citizens or organised groups are equal in their capacity to confer legitimacy on the state, or to orchestrate processes that could de-legitimise it. In some contexts, only powerful groups like the military or business may be able to influence the state's legitimacy. Explanations of state legitimacy need to account for the ability of **different social groups** to form a critical mass with the **capacity to confer legitimacy** on the state, or to withdraw it.

## Measuring state legitimacy

Much research on legitimacy is not focused on the politics of its construction – that is, what is being legitimised, on what basis, by whom, and the political and communication processes through which (de-)legitimation happens. Measuring legitimacy has dominated the field, but has tended to provide a static, apolitical, and actor-free account.

Researchers have mainly measured legitimacy either by asking people how they perceive the state, or by observing how far people act as though it is legitimate, or some combination of the two. Both opinion-based and behavioural entry points have strong theoretical rationales, but neither is a precise measurement tool for capturing the right to rule. Further, focusing only on these entry points neglects the political processes of legitimation that lie behind any changes in opinion-based or behavioural markers.

## A political approach to legitimacy

Changes in legitimacy (indicators) at critical junctures – or those moments when the state's legitimacy consolidates or is called into question – are products of historical legacies, shifting social norms and political processes. These changes can only be understood in the context of the expectations in the social contract, which set a threshold of acceptability against which the state's rightfulness is assessed. The changes happen under the influence of the contemporary political settlement, and are a product of the degree to which powerful groups are included or excluded from the state's resources.

They are engineered through political processes – such as when elites draw on people's norms and ideas to persuade them that the rules of power are justifiable. Through such processes, evaluations of the state (beliefs) are collectively formulated and turned into action (behaviour). A focus on these historical legacies and political processes, and how they can help explain changes in legitimacy, brings us closer to the political heart of the concept – that is, on what basis, how and by whom legitimacy is engineered in the contest over rightful power.

## A framework for analysing service delivery and state legitimacy

So how can this understanding of legitimacy help us address specific legitimacy puzzles? The framework summarised in Table 1 below applies this political and historically-informed approach to the question of whether, when, and why service delivery supports or undermines a state's legitimacy.

Table 2 overleaf further unpacks how policymakers could consider the range of effects service delivery might have on state legitimacy, and the kinds of assumption researchers could test about these effects.

The framework incorporates the role of history and politics in four ways:

- It calls for more attention to **social norms**, against which the justifiability of service delivery is assessed, in understanding when and why services may influence changes in legitimacy.
- It proposes that any legitimacy gains/losses attributable to changes in service delivery have to be understood in the context of the **social contract** and the expectations of rights and entitlements it establishes.
- It draws attention to the **structural political conditions** that form the backdrop of citizens' assessments of the state's performance on service delivery. These include the degree and sources of legitimacy the state has overall, and the inclusion/exclusion of certain groups in the political settlement.
- It incorporates the role of processes of **politicisation**, paying particular attention to how actors convey the justifiability of services, and how this influences perceptions of, or behaviour towards, the state.

Exploring these conditions through qualitative analysis could help give thick, narrative description to any identified correlations between indicators, and could support a fuller political analysis of what is a fundamentally political phenomenon.

**Table 1: Exploring why and how services influence state legitimacy in political perspective**

		Possible focus of analysis
Service	Justifiability of service delivery	Norms Procedures Outcomes
	Service characteristics	Historical and social significance Visibility and attributability
Structure	Social contract	Expectations of rights and entitlements
	Legitimacy context	State's legitimacy reservoir/starting points
	Nature of political settlement	Inclusion/exclusion of different groups
Agency	The (de-)legitimation process	Public discourse around service delivery Politicisation of procedures / norms / outcomes

See the full paper at: [http://publications.dlprog.org/StateLegitimacy\\_PoliticalApproach.pdf](http://publications.dlprog.org/StateLegitimacy_PoliticalApproach.pdf)

**Table 2: Service delivery and state legitimacy – some testable assumptions**

Category	Object of analysis	Testable assumptions		
		Positive impact: service delivery supports state legitimacy when....	Neutral impact: service delivery has no effect on state legitimacy when....	Negative impact: service delivery undermines legitimacy when....
Justifiability of service delivery	Norms: Services are allocated according to social norms (e.g. merit, equity, inequity, rights)	Allocation / delivery upholds social norms	Allocation / delivery upholds social norms	Allocation and delivery challenges social norms
	Procedures: (Perceptions of) procedural fairness	Processes of allocation and delivery are considered procedurally fair	Citizens attach no significance to processes of allocation or delivery	Processes of decision-making and delivery are thought procedurally unfair
	Outcomes: (Perceptions of) improvements/deteriorations in quality	There is a qualitative improvement in user experience or perceptions of others' experiences	There is no qualitative change in user experience or perceptions of others' experiences	There is a felt deterioration in user experience or perceptions of others' experiences
	(Perceptions of) distributive justice	Services perceived to be allocated fairly among groups	Services not targeted to any particular group	Services perceived to be allocated unfairly among groups
Service characteristics	Historical and social significance for state-society relations	Services uphold social contract between state and key constituencies	Services not part of social contract between state and key constituencies	Services rupture social contract between state and key constituencies
	<b>Technical characteristics:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visibility</li> <li>• Political salience</li> <li>• Attributability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service outcomes are visible (&amp; positive)</li> <li>• Service is politically salient</li> <li>• The state is credited with good performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service outcomes are not visible</li> <li>• Service is not politically salient</li> <li>• The state is not credited or blamed for performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service outcomes are visible (&amp; negative)</li> <li>• Service is politically salient</li> <li>• The state is blamed for poor performance</li> </ul>
Social contract	Expectations of service rights and entitlements	Expectations match delivery	No expectations to be met	Expectations do not match delivery
	Who is expected to deliver	State is expected to deliver	State is not expected to deliver	State is expected to deliver
Legitimacy context	State's legitimacy reservoir / starting point	Service delivery is a source of state legitimacy and justifiable by norms / outcomes / procedures	Service delivery is not a source of state legitimacy	Service delivery is a source of state legitimacy but is unjustifiable by norms / outcomes / procedures
Nature of political settlement	Inclusion / exclusion of different groups	Service delivery addresses perceived exclusion (may simultaneously improve / weaken legitimacy among different groups)	Services reproduce acceptable status quo of inter-group relations	Services exacerbate existing group perceptions of exclusion from the political settlement
The (de-)legitimation process	Public discourse around service delivery	Political actors can justify performance in terms of social norms	There is no expectation that performance needs to be justified	Political actors fail to justify performance
	Politicisation of unjustifiable norms / procedures / outcomes	Political opportunity structures disable acts of dissent	Political opportunity structures disable acts of dissent	Political opportunity structures enable acts of dissent