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## The legitimation of radical change

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### 1. Introduction

As the international public debate goes, the world should prepare for a rising number of unforeseen and even catastrophic events of a magnitude likely to affect entire societies, countries or regions (Grin / Rotmans / Schot 2010: 1; Giddens 2009: 10). Much of the debate focuses on geophysical events commonly ascribed to the global climate change: floods (such as in Pakistan), draughts and fires (such as in Russia), massive landslides (such as in China). However, disastrous incidents not caused by climate change, for instance earthquakes (Haiti, Chile) and accidental oil spills (USA, China), also contribute to this generalized feeling. In addition, there are some other global trends, like rapid urbanization and demographic change, which, together with climate change, nurture the prospect of mounting risks and challenges in the future.

Situations where exogenous factors affect various societal subsystems (the economy, the political system, cultural patterns, the ecological system) simultaneously and in ways which transcend the boundaries of path-dependent adaptation can be labelled “*radical change*”. We assume that a growing number of states will have to face situations of this kind in the future. The way states deal with radical change will have enormous consequences for their respective societies. At the same time, the capacity of states to actually *manage* those changes and to muster the necessary resources differs widely, with many developing countries presumably in a rather weak position. The OECD (2008: 12) refers to this as *resilience* – “the ability to cope with changes in capacity, effectiveness, or legitimacy”.

In dealing with situations of change, states use *power* (Avelino / Rotmans 2010). There are three interrelated dimensions of power which together constitute the universe of resources states can bring into play in dealing with radical change: (i) The *authority* to effectively produce binding decisions, reflected in the political power game and its decision-making procedures,<sup>1</sup> (ii) the *capacity* to implement public policies, collect revenues and provide public ser-

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘facticity of rule’ in Habermasian terms, see Habermas 1992.

vices, embodied in the public administration and infrastructure, and (iii) the *legitimacy* a political order enjoys if its claim of acting in the common interest is acknowledged.<sup>2</sup>

While the first two dimensions have been actively explored in the political science literature, the latter dimension – legitimacy – has so far attracted less attention. Legitimacy rests on the acknowledgment that a political order exists “rightfully” and that its exponents (the “state” or “government”) act in the common interest. Many scholars who explore the dynamics of political change and stability do not consider legitimacy a useful (or even valid) analytical category. Instead, they prefer to speak about “justification of rule”, “regime support”, etc.<sup>3</sup> More recently, however, various research projects have deepened our understanding of legitimacy.<sup>4</sup> Thanks to these efforts, we have gained additional knowledge on the different sources or types of legitimacy, and we are in a better position to assess degrees of legitimacy in different settings.

Not all the studies referred to above would agree on legitimacy being a *necessary* element of political order, but there is a general consensus regarding the importance of legitimacy both for the authority to formulate and the capacity to implement binding decisions. As a matter of fact, every political order designed to last in time engages in the strategic procurement of legitimacy – an activity called *legitimation* in this paper. We assume that situations of radical change have a strong impact on legitimation. States will rely on (and sometimes modify) legitimation as a response to changing preference orders and power constellations, striving to manage the situation in a context of insecurity and risk.<sup>5</sup>

Against this background, the present paper aims at shedding light on how situations of radical change challenge the way political orders legitimate themselves. It parts from the observation that there are different ways legitimacy is procured. Individual political orders are characterized by a specific mix of legitimation modalities (a legitimation *profile*), which

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<sup>2</sup> See OECD 2008: 12 and Carment / Prest / Samy 2010: 86-88 for similar frameworks, albeit with different conceptualizations.

<sup>3</sup> To give an example, one of the classic readings in the contemporary political science debate on the state, ‘Bringing the State Back In’ by Evans / Rueschemeyer / Skocpol (1985), does hardly mention the term ‘legitimacy’ at all.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Gilley (2006) has achieved important progress in measuring legitimacy, with a special focus on China (see also Gilley 2009; Holbig / Gilley 2010). Booth / Seligson (2009) is an insightful study on legitimacy in eight Latin American countries. Kane / Loy / Patapan (2010) have compiled a number of studies on the legitimacy of East Asian political systems, as has White (2005) a few years earlier. Other recent contributions include Stark (2010); Patty / Penn (2010); Power / Cyr (2009); Gel'man (2010). These contributions approach the subject mostly from the perspective also chosen in this paper, i.e. focussing on nation-states. In addition, there is a lively academic debate on legitimacy in international or transnational settings, which escapes the focus of the present paper.

<sup>5</sup> Apart from ‘legitimacy’ and ‘legitimation’, this paper uses terms such as ‘political rule’, ‘political order’, ‘political regime’, ‘state’, and ‘common interest’. Since this is not the place for an in-depth discussion of these fundamental yet conflictive concepts, I offer some straightforward working definitions in order to avoid confusion: (i) ‘Political rule’ refers to the practice of producing and implementing binding regulative and allocative decisions. (ii) ‘Political order’ is the overall institutional and normative setting in which political rule takes place. (iii) ‘Regimes’ are understood as sets of institutions, norms and procedures that cover specific aspects of a political order. (iv) ‘State’ refers to the part of a political order which defines the common interest (in terms of values and norms, but also in territorial, demographic and material terms), and which produces and enforces binding decisions acting upon that common interest. (v) Finally, ‘common interest’ is an interest that benefits all members of a society (although not necessarily all of them to the same degree).

shapes the capacity of states to respond to radical change both in positive terms (providing key resources, stabilizing expectations and facilitating change) and in negative terms (consuming resources and precluding reforms).

The following section introduces the concept of radical change from a political science perspective (section 2). The paper then discusses the strategic procurement of legitimacy (section 3). The concept will subsequently be applied to the political management of radical change (section 4). The main objective is to assess the capability of existing political orders to manage change from a common interest perspective.

## 2. Conceptualizing radical change

Events like those mentioned in the introduction (earthquakes, draughts, floods, oil spills, wars, etc.) are typically the outcome of factors which mostly escape the control of those bearing the consequences. Although they are not necessarily unforeseeable as such, they are often unpredicted in their concrete manifestation. Economists refer to such constellations as *external shocks*.<sup>6</sup>

External shocks constitute a factor of *stress* for the societies affected by them. The need to adapt to changing environmental conditions causes societies to mobilize additional resources, to change preference orders or to rearrange institutional settings. Stress may be internalized by the various subsystems of a society in an incremental transformation sometimes called *transition*: “non-linear processes of social change in which a societal system is structurally transformed” (Avelino / Rotmans 2009: 543).

The academic debate on transition focuses on goal-oriented action covering time spans of 25 to 50 years. It envisions systemic change above all as a process that leads “from one dynamic state of equilibrium to another” (Avelino / Rotmans 2009: 544), following a non-linear pattern and passing through the stages of predevelopment, take-off, acceleration and stabilization. The debate does account for possible alternative scenarios, with systems experiencing lock-ins, backlashes or even complete breakdowns (Rotmans / Loorbach 2010: 129-131), but the ‘default option’ appears to be restabilization.

However, a non-deterministic understanding of change would be very much in line with a political science view on political development, with an emerging stable order far from being the necessary outcome of societal change. External shocks sometimes generate an amount of stress which exceeds the incremental adaptation capacity of societies. In that case they trigger *radical change*. The term refers to situations characterized by

- Stress affecting various subsystems (political, socio-economic, cultural, ecological, etc.) simultaneously and in a mutually reinforcing manner;
- Drastic (non-path dependent) alterations of societal preference orders, affecting the mobilization and allocation of social resources and the capacities for collective action; and
- A generalized perception of crisis and insecurity among social actors, with a concomitant loss of confidence, and a shortening of economic, political and private planning cycles.

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<sup>6</sup> For economists, external shocks are not necessarily negative. For instance, a revenue *bonanza* thanks to rising world commodity prices would be considered an external shock. However, in this paper we limit the analysis to events with an immediate negative impact on a society’s resources.

Radical change affects the quantity and quality of public services as well as the way states are perceived by their citizens. It may eventually lead to new constellations of power and legitimation, and to a new distribution of the costs and benefits arising from public action, but not necessarily to a general (re-) stabilization of the political system.

The notions of external shock and radical change imply a certain acceleration of developments, but this does not necessarily refer to the underlying issues themselves. Sometimes, problems build up slowly over a long period of time before societies perceive their relevance and begin to deal with them. In facing exogenous change societies may also be able to maintain a path-dependent pattern of adaptation over an extended period of time before eventually reaching a 'tipping point' (Gladwell 2000) and experiencing radical change.

External shocks frequently exceed the boundaries of individual states, involving issues and organizations at a regional or international level. But in our Westphalian world order it is the nation-states with their societies which receive the largest part of the stress generated by external shocks, even in the case of global events such as the recent financial crisis.

### *The role of the state*

Putting the state at the centre of analysis should not lead to overemphasizing the role of states in modern societies. It is a well-established fact by now that there is an increasing number of actors, both internationally and domestically, involved in the provision of public goods. Also, along with hierarchical modes of political rule and public administration, heterarchical forms such as networking, consultation, devolution and public-private partnerships are employed in the formulation and implementation of public policies. As a result, social scientists have long waved the idea of states (or governments) being able to steer modern, complex societies toward the collective pursuit of a common good (Grin 2010:221).

However, in dealing with radical change, states are still the most important actors (Meadowcroft 2005: 493; Giddens 2009: 5). *First*, they are ultimately responsible for providing critical public services,<sup>7</sup> such as protection from security threats, public health, transport infrastructure and disaster relief. *Second*, states are in charge of mobilizing societal resources necessary to deal with external shocks. *Third*, they can be an important factor of integration, often making collective action possible in the first place. *Fourth*, they provide places and procedures by which societies can agree on new norms, institutions and preference orders in the course of radical change. *Fifth*, they are key players in international politics and in the transformation of international agreements into national policies.

While societies *experience* radical change, states are supposed to *manage* it. This means, states have the primary function of organizing collective responses to stress from a common interest perspective. At the same time, however, as parts of society-as-a-whole they are also *affected* by radical change:

To begin with, as a first immediate effect external shocks frequently undermine the *capacity* of states to provide public services and to mobilize resources at a moment when these services and resources are most urgently needed. Often, shocks cause severe damages to public infrastructure, or lead to diminishing public revenues from taxes, royalties, etc. Public officials may not be able (or willing) anymore to fulfil their normal functions. Sometimes, entire

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<sup>7</sup> With the term 'public services' I mean to refer to the whole range of goods and services provided by public entities, including basic social services, security and legal protection, public infrastructure, etc.

territorial units (provinces, municipalities) or branches of the state (for instance, the security forces) may experience a total breakdown.

Radical change may limit the *authority* of states to formulate and implement binding decisions. Since change is often accompanied by growing levels of social conflict, it may strengthen actors who challenge the state by claiming superior authority for their own actions. Also, radical change may bring about alternative rules and procedures for the formulation and implementation of public policies, imposing new institutional and normative settings on the state. The clearest example for this kind of effect is a military *coup d'état*.

Finally, radical change can put into question the *legitimacy* of states. This occurs when parts of the society do not accept anymore that the existing political order is the best (available) alternative to serve the common interest. Shifting social preferences, for instance, may deeply challenge the legitimacy of a political order if the state fails to deliver on the new priority values of the society. Social groups may cease to believe in the superior qualities of their charismatic leader, or in the adequacy of democratic procedures.

From this point of view, the question “How do states respond to situations of radical change?” has a “defensive” connotation: “How do states *protect* their assets (in terms of capacity, authority and legitimacy) from being affected by radical change?”, and an “offensive” connotation: “How do states *employ* their assets (capacity, authority and legitimacy) in order to manage radical change?”<sup>8</sup> It appears obvious that individual states, characterized by specific patterns of capacity, authority and legitimacy, are affected by and respond to these situations in different ways.

In principle, the best way for a state to protect its assets would be to assume an active role in the management of change. However, it can be said that the two connotations mark two extremes of state response to radical change: On the one hand, the state as preserver of order and defender of the status quo, trying to maintain stability, shielding the society from stress caused by external shock and sticking to path-dependency as long as possible. On the other hand, the state as promoter of innovation and driver of change, trying to mobilize additional resources, focussing societal learning processes and “inventing” new institutional solutions.

From these considerations, a set of empirical research questions can be derived: (i) What are the basic patterns of legitimation? (ii) How do states maintain legitimacy in the light of external shocks and radical change? (iii) How do legitimation patterns condition the ability of states to manage change? These questions will be explored more in detail in the following sections.

### **3. The strategic procurement of legitimacy**

As has been said in the introduction, the legitimacy of a political order rests on the acknowledgement of its claim of acting in the common interest. Hence, it is based on a particular relationship between ruler and ruled: the ruler raises a claim, the ruled accepts it – or rejects it. Since individual or collective acknowledgment is a crucial element of legitimation, in principle every individual or collective political actor can speak up on legitimacy issues. Opposite to

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<sup>8</sup> This mirrors Stepan's (1985: 320-340) distinction between “offensive” and “defensive” projects of political regimes: Offensive projects have a foundational character and aim at overcoming lock-ins resulting from path dependency. Defensive projects are formulated in reaction to a perceived threat to society. They aim at preserving (or reconsolidating) a given order.

the *claim* of legitimacy raised by a ruler there is also a *demand* for legitimation expressed by the ruled. Nevertheless, not every demand has the same weight.

- First, some actors enjoy more political influence than others because they are more articulate, better organized, or control strategic resources. If these actors question the legitimacy of a political order, the impact on regime stability or capacity is much higher than in the case of less powerful members of society – especially in a situation where societal resources get suddenly scarcer and distributional conflicts grow sharper. This is why rulers design legitimation strategies geared towards specific groups within a society, specifically in times of crisis and change.<sup>9</sup>
- Second, the impact legitimation demands have depends on a broad range of external factors and trends, many of which escape the control of rulers or ruled. For instance, if a political regime is already under stress due to a major external shock, an otherwise insignificant action of a small group may acquire critical relevance. Also, a latent issue may suddenly become a crucial legitimation topic as a result of, say, economic crisis or the actions of foreign powers.
- Third, not every legitimation demand is equally well suited to be put forward successfully within a given political regime. This has something to do with the type of legitimation (which will be discussed below), with the number and kind of people affected, the underlying value judgments and priorities, the social conflicts that shape the political arena, the time horizon of the issue brought forward (or of the solutions available), and so on.
- Fourth, apart from national political actors with their demands there are international actors who may exert considerable influence over the legitimacy of a political order. This is why some authors even consider “international legitimacy” as a particular form of legitimacy in its own right (for instance, see Unsworth 2010: 28-29).
- Fifth, in addition to legitimation strategies, every political regime produces formal and informal rules to deal with legitimation demands. These rules cover (i) the issues that may, or may not, be raised (e.g., many democratic regimes prohibit openly racist positions to be brought to the public), (ii) access to decision-making bodies, (iii) modes of demand articulation (rules for political parties, NGOs, public demonstrations, political campaigns, mass media, etc.), and (iv) the processing of demands by governments (administrative, legislative and judicial processes, the use of police and security forces, etc.).

Obviously, the less democratic a regime, the more repressive and selective its handling of legitimation demands.<sup>10</sup> However, it is important to keep in mind that every political regime devices this kind of rules. In fact, they are a key feature of political efficiency.

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<sup>9</sup> Weber accounted for different target groups by singling out the administrative staff as a special addressee of a ruler’s legitimation efforts. See Weber 1976: 122. Today, we would recognize other holders of strategic resources, such as the private sector, organized labour, the military, traditional authorities representing ethnic groups, etc.

<sup>10</sup> The power resources available to impose rules, however, depend themselves to a considerable degree on the legitimacy a political regime enjoys. Consequently, there should be a point where a regime can no longer afford to suppress legitimation demands, because it lacks the necessary resources to do so without putting in jeopardy its own stability.

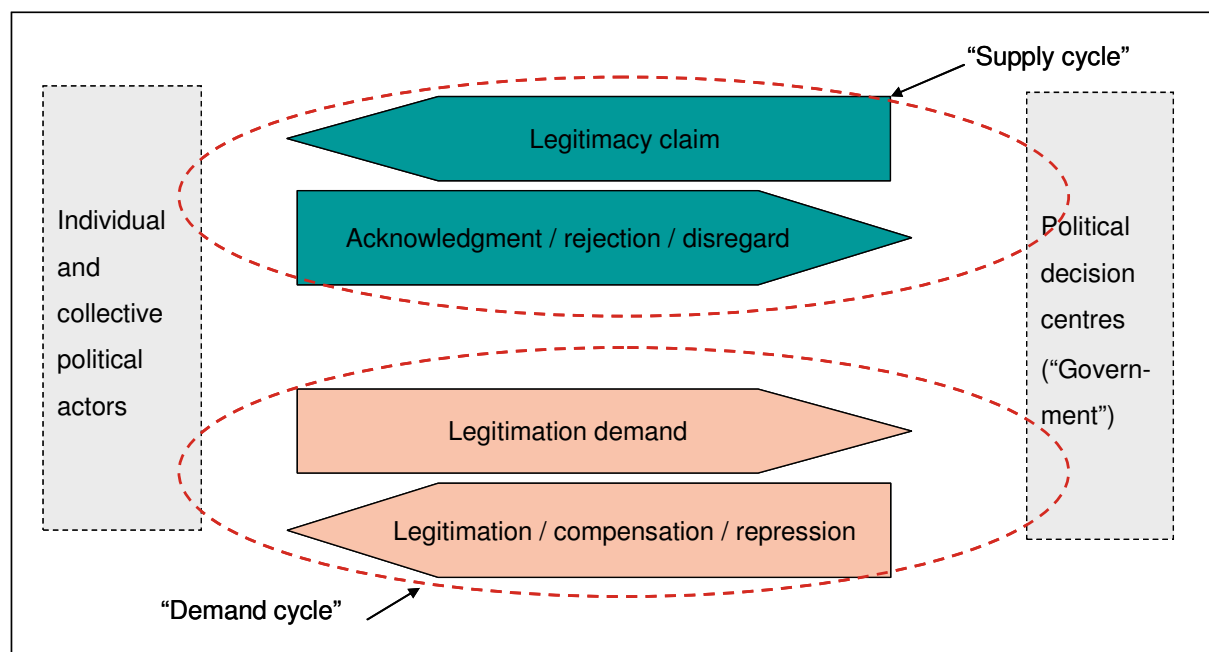
## A typology of legitimation

Every scholar using legitimacy as an analytical concept identifies different types (or sources) of legitimacy. There is a considerable variety of types, but there are two basic approaches to the subject:

- A first group asks what makes individual or collective political actors *believe* that a given political order, state or regime is legitimate. In many cases, social scientists refer to Weber's (1976: 124) basic distinction of rational-legal, traditional and charismatic legitimacy,<sup>11</sup> or to Easton's (1965: 267-277) distinction of specific and diffuse support.<sup>12</sup>
- A second group asks how political orders, states or regimes substantiate their *claim* to be legitimate. This group argues that individual beliefs may be based on erroneous perceptions, manipulation, habits or diffuse feelings. In order to qualify as legitimate, a political order must therefore possess some objective characteristics, which Beetham (1991: 3-13) identifies as legal validity, moral justifiability and evidence of consent.<sup>13</sup>

This paper argues that the distinction between legitimacy founded on subjective belief and legitimacy founded on objective characteristics of political order is flawed because it fails to recognize the dual character of the relationship: On the one hand, there is the strategic procurement of legitimacy, a process where rulers have to give good reasons for their claim that the political order they represent serves the common good best. On the other hand, there are the political actors who demand specific legitimizing actions and who ultimately acknowledge or reject the claim raised by the ruler based on their views, preferences and expectations.

**Figure 1: The dual character of legitimation**



Source: author's own elaboration

<sup>11</sup> For instance, see Unsworth 2010: 15-20

<sup>12</sup> For instance, see Stark 2010.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, Gilley 2009 bases his approach on Beetham's distinction, even though he takes the notions as three different types of legitimacy rather than as three dimensions of a single concept.

The approach presented here parts from the observation that legitimation relationships materialize around individual allocative or regulative decisions.<sup>14</sup> As a matter of fact, every allocative or regulative decision is characterized always and necessarily by six elements, each of which can become the target of legitimation efforts:

- These decisions have a **content** which affects a specific group of actors;
- They express value judgments and **preference orders**;
- Someone issues them, acting at the same time as a person (**authority**) and
- As the embodiment of an institution (**authority role**);
- Decisions are produced and implemented through **institutionalized procedures**;
- Finally, they rest on **normative principles** and ideas whose common denominator lies in the claim of the political order to be “good” or “adequate” for a given society.

At each link of this chain, issues of legitimation can be brought forward and settled, or alternatively transferred to another stage. Take for instance the decision to depose a president and bring him to a third country. The content of this decision may cause considerable legitimacy problems, if parts of the population and the international community reach the conclusion that the move is unjustified. These legitimacy problems can perhaps be settled through other material decisions (e.g., flying the president back in). But they can also be lifted to another level, (i) by appealing to the underlying priority order of the decision (e.g.: “Protecting the nation from the president’s decisions was more important than following the rules”); (ii) by referring to the charismatic quality of personal leadership (e.g.: “Our new ruler has superior qualities which justify the move”); (iii) by alluding to authority roles (e.g.: “If the Supreme Court supports the decision, it should not be put it into doubt”); (iv) by bringing up underlying institutional issues (e.g.: “The decision to depose the president has not been voted by parliament. It is therefore unlawful and should not be obeyed”); or (v) by referring to basic principles (e.g.: “Every nation has the right to defend itself against tyrants”).

### *Legitimation modalities*

As can be seen from the example, each element of regulative or allocative decisions issued by the representatives of a political order can be linked to a specific legitimation modality:

**Content-based legitimations** employ material policies.<sup>15</sup> They can be directed towards large parts of the population (e.g. distribution through social policies), but they can also be concentrated on small target groups, whose support is deemed crucial for the regime. This

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<sup>14</sup> “Decisions” should be understood in a broad sense, not only referring to laws, regulations, orders or judicial statements, but also to specific actions by public authorities. Another political output which may impact on legitimacy is ideological or value statements. See Easton 1965: 352-362 for a typology of political outputs.

<sup>15</sup> Please note that this does not refer to the self-interested exchange of political support for material benefits. Obviously, this also exists in politics, and the boundaries between content-based legitimation and the serving of particular interests are often blurred. Legitimacy as a resource can only be generated if the policy in question is accepted as functional for society as a whole, not just for specific groups. This, of course, may itself become the issue of political conflict: for instance, the recent decision of the German government to extend the operating time of nuclear power plants may be considered a decision for the common good by some, while others may look at it as a self-interested decision in favour of a small group of big companies who support the government.



legitimation strategy may acquire crucial relevance at certain stages of time, e.g. at the beginning of a new regime seeking to consolidate itself, or in a situation of acute political crisis.

**Value-based legitimations** refer to a given order of preferences by emphasizing values such as security and public order, individual or collective well-being, personal freedom, cultural identity, etc. For instance, if a political regime consistently refuses to address security and public order as key values, some parts of society may begin to consider a military coup as a legitimate response.

**Charismatic legitimations** offer a perspective of political and social inclusion, typically achieved through the direct relationship between the individual political actor and an “enlightened” leader. Their main advantage lies in relieving the political regime from particular legitimation demands: trust or devotion to a person replace the acknowledgment of specific legitimation claims, thus granting the ruler additional political autonomy and access to resources.<sup>16</sup>

**Role-based legitimations** focus on the “charismatic appeal” of authority roles.<sup>17</sup> Through tradition, heritage, or alternatively a high and sustained degree of technical capacity, institutions as such can become trustworthy. As a result, incumbents can change (for instance in the wake of elections) without a concomitant loss of trust in a public policy. For a political order, this legitimation strategy has the additional advantage of avoiding political questioning within specific policy areas.

**Procedural legitimations** are based on institutionalized patterns of decision-making and implementation. Most importantly, through the mechanisms of political representation and legality, procedures endow individual decisions with a presupposition of legitimacy: citizens do not have to examine each and every decision that affects them. Rather, they assume that decisions based on established procedures can be accepted as “rightful” and “good” for society as a whole. This assumption even covers future decisions, or decisions that affect citizens negatively.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, this legitimation strategy supports a broader range of decisions in a more stable way than the strategies discussed so far.

**Normative legitimations** refer to the basic ideas or principles incorporated by a political order in order to qualify as “good”. The ideas of national identity, sovereignty and human dignity, or the principles of democracy and rule of law may serve as examples. At this level, legitimation often entails acts of symbolic integration, for instance the use of state symbols (flags, anthems), as well as the reference to traditions and founding myths (“grand sagas”). The inclusion of overarching norms and goals in political constitutions is yet another reference to this legitimation strategy.

Normative legitimations constitute the highest level of the legitimation process: If legitimation succeeds at this stage, even blatant flaws at the other levels will do no harm to the regime in

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<sup>16</sup> See Weber (1976), pp. 140f for the original argument.

<sup>17</sup> See Weber (1976), pp. 142-148 and 662-679.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to bear in mind, though, that citizens are always free to stop assuming and actually question the legitimate grounds of any decision they chose to put into doubt, even if it is produced in the most democratic way. For instance, if a democratically elected parliament established obligatory military service for male adults, some members of society could chose to disobey this ruling because of their religious or moral convictions. Their position would be that the state has exceeded its legitimate right to rule at this point.

question. However, if legitimation fails at this stage, it can not be compensated at other stages. In such a case, rulers can only react with normative adjustments, or else forego legitimation at this point or vis-à-vis this group of actors. At the same time, political actors, once they reject the legitimacy claim at this stage, can not re-orient their legitimacy beliefs to other dimensions of the political order. Instead, they would have to adjust their own normative convictions, build up resistance against the regime, resign from participation in public affairs – or integrate themselves cynically in an order they believe is not truly “rightful”. This appears to be the case today of many citizens with an “immigration background” in Western Europe.

### *Criteria for the assessment of legitimation modalities*

Legitimation modalities differ with regard to their design and impact. These differences can be assessed from four perspectives: (i) scope, (ii) reach, (iii) adaptability and (iv) cost.

- *Scope* refers to the question whether legitimacy is procured in connection with a specific policy, a policy area / institution, or a broader set of policy areas / institutions. For instance, the reputation of a central bank as an independent, technical body (role-based legitimation) generates legitimacy with reference to a specific policy area (monetary policy). In contrast, legitimation based on parliamentary democracy (procedural legitimation) typically extends to the whole range of policy areas subject to parliamentary deliberation. Related to this is the question whether a legitimation modality may create a “stock” of legitimacy concerning future decisions (durability).<sup>19</sup>
- *Reach* refers to the addressees of legitimation: is legitimacy procured from a small group of actors, from larger parts of a society (or international actors), or from society (the international community) as a whole? For instance, the decision to put a hold on a major dam project (content-based legitimation) may be crucial to (re-) gain legitimacy from the local population affected by that project. On the other hand, public adherence to the principles of human rights and dignity (normative legitimation) may be designed to gain legitimacy from society and the international community as a whole. If legitimation is directed toward specific groups, the risk is higher that it will be contested by other groups.
- *Adaptability* refers to the question how a specific modality responds to changing legitimation demands. For instance, for a military regime that bases its legitimacy on the promise of security (value-based legitimation), it may be difficult to adapt if the prevailing preference-order happens to shift towards higher degrees of freedom once security is achieved. Related to this issue is the question of complexity, i.e. how many actors and institutions are involved in a legitimation modality.
- *Cost* refers to the resources a political regime has to mobilize in the context of its legitimation efforts. For instance, the mobilization of supporters typical for charismatic legitimation usually requires ever increasing efforts, whereas in principle a modality based on rather constant regime characteristics (role-based or procedural legitimation) should be less costly. This category also includes the limits to revenue mobilization imposed by legitimation, for instance by making it impossible to collect taxes from particularly powerful groups.

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<sup>19</sup> A “stock” of legitimacy is generated if political actors feel they can infer from the current situation to the future legitimacy of the decisions produced by a political order, a leader or a particular institution.

Complexity reduction is a basic feature of rule in modern societies: if political actors began questioning each and every decision that concerned them, the political regime would over-heat immediately. Successful legitimation relieves both rulers and ruled from the pressure of rationalizing rule at every point and moment in time. Hence, the broader the scope, reach and durability of a legitimation strategy, the more important its contribution to regime efficiency and effectiveness. In a period of radical change, however, other features of legitimation may become even more important, such as for instance the capacity to adapt flexibly to changing demands, or the cost legitimation entails in terms of additional resource mobilization. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the six modalities.

<b>Table 1: Criteria for the assessment of legitimation modalities</b>				
	<i>Scope</i>	<i>Reach</i>	<i>Adaptability</i>	<i>Cost</i>
<i>Content-based legitimation</i>	Limited to specific policies or areas, legitimacy can not be put “on stock”	Rather focused on specific groups than performance-based in general	Highly flexible, based on executive action	High costs because of material content and rising demand levels
<i>Value-based legitimation</i>	Broad scope, but not very durable because of shifting preferences or disappointment	Rather broad reach, but can also be focused on specific groups	Rather flexible, unless the regime becomes attached to a specific preference order	Typically low cost
<i>Charismatic legitimation</i>	Broad scope, durability hinges on trust put into leadership	Often directed towards specific sectors of society (“them” vs. “us”), may be contested	Highly flexible	High and growing costs because of in-built mobilization
<i>Role-based legitimation</i>	Limited to specific policy areas, highly durable (based on reputation)	Either broad reach or focused on a specific “policy community”	Not flexible	Typically low cost
<i>Procedural legitimation</i>	Broad scope, highly durable	Broad reach, extends typically to all political actors	Not flexible	Typically low cost
<i>Normative legitimation</i>	Broad scope, highly durable	Broad reach, but may be contested by alternative visions	Typically not flexible, but can be shifted towards new collective visions and goals	Rather low cost in normal times, but can become exceedingly high in times of crisis
Source: author’s own elaboration				

*Legitimation profiles*

For a given political order characterized by a specific mix of legitimation modalities (a “legitimation profile”), it should be possible to describe the resulting picture of scope, reach, adaptability and cost in form of a scorecard, where low, medium or high scores in each dimension are linked to specific observations (see Table 2). A political order that ranks high on the first two dimensions (scope and reach) is presumably in a good position in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, while a political order with high scores in adaptability may find it

easier to adapt to rapid changes in the demand structure. If legitimation costs are already high under “normal” circumstances, they may become exceedingly high in times of radical change, particularly if there are severe limits to revenue collection built into legitimation.

**Table 2: Assessing legitimation profiles**

	<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>Scope</i>	Limited scope, “single-purpose regime”, no durability	Medium scope, some issues not open to legitimation, some durability	Broad scope, covering the whole political range, high durability
<i>Reach</i>	Limited reach, catering only to the demands of a small ruling elite, very likely to be contested	Medium reach, excluding some political actors or collectivities, some contestation possible	Broad reach, covering political actors nationally and internationally, not contested
<i>Adaptability</i>	Limited adaptability, legitimation completely institutionalized and with a large number of actors and institutions involved	Medium adaptability, legitimation partly institutionalized, partly open to swift changes by a small group of actors	High adaptability, legitimation completely in the hands of the executive branch, small number of actors and institutions
<i>Cost</i>	No discernible costs, legitimation embedded in “normal” functioning of the regime, no specific limits to resource mobilization	Medium costs, substantial funds geared towards legitimation, but no rapid increase, some limits to resource mobilization	High (or rising) costs, legitimation clearly the priority of the regime, severe limits to resource mobilization

Source: author’s own elaboration

Finally, while it is difficult to imagine political orders with high scores in scope and reach and at the same time a low overall legitimacy, it should be noted that the focus is on the strategic *procurement* of legitimacy (legitimation), not on legitimacy itself: even political orders with broad scope and reach may experience legitimacy crises, if key political actors refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy claim. The “strength” or “degree” of legitimacy at a certain moment in time is not *necessarily* linked to a specific combination of scores, even though some combinations appear much more solid than others.

**4. Legitimation in a context of radical change**

The preceding section has introduced the basic modalities of legitimation employed by any political order designed to last in time. It has then identified four criteria – scope, reach, adaptability and cost – to assess the legitimation profile of given political orders. This section discusses how states or political regimes maintain legitimacy in the light of radical change, and how their legitimation profile shapes their ability to manage change.

“Radical change” was presented above as change (i) occurring simultaneously in various dimensions (economic, social, political, cultural etc.), (ii) leading to profound modifications in societal value systems and preference orders and (iii) linked to a general perception of crisis and insecurity. In such a situation there will be high pressure on the state to issue and implement allocative and regulative decisions and adapt its structures and processes. At the same time, there will be a significant drain on public resources and a growing inclination of political actors to question the common good orientation of state decisions or procedures.

### *Maintaining legitimacy in situations of radical change*

There is of course a huge variety of ways through which external shocks impact on a society, and obviously also many kinds of radical change societies may experience. However, it appears that there are not so many ways radical change impacts on the *legitimacy* of a political order, as the basic issue at stake is always the acknowledgement of the political order's claim to serve the common good. This paper argues that there are three main causal mechanisms:

- First, radical change can affect the way people perceive the provision of public services. This is first of all an issue of security and protection, since a generalized feeling of crisis and insecurity is a basic characteristic of radical change. In broader terms it can be said that radical change often leads to an emerging gap between what citizens expect and what states deliver. This causal mechanism can be called the *delivery challenge*.
- Second, radical change usually alters the way people look at the distribution of assets, obligations and opportunities in a society. Those who feel that they are losing out in this process may raise legitimacy issues, not only in material terms (demanding compensations for welfare losses) but also referring to the procedures of interest articulation and political decision-making. This can be called the *distributive challenge*.
- Third, radical change will often lead to increased levels of social mobilization – in a literal sense, referring to migration, internal displacements, etc., but also in a more political sense, referring to distributional conflicts, civic self-organization, etc. This kind of mobilization may acquire a political dynamic on its own, causing a profound impact on the legitimacy of the political order. This is the *mobilisation challenge*.

In dealing with these challenges, political regimes (as long as they are designed to last in time) will try to manage radical change in a way that minimizes its impact on their power base and ensures their own survival. This entails procuring a minimum amount of legitimacy and maintaining the basic patterns of legitimation as long as possible. Consequently, states will act upon the legitimation *demand* produced by political actors as well as adapt the *supply* (active procurement) of legitimacy.

In terms of demand, the original mix of modalities (legitimation profile) of a political order may become contested and competing legitimation demands may emerge (Unsworth 2010: 37-40). States therefore combine strategies of adaptation and accommodation with a repressive handling of legitimation demands. The latter refers to the above-mentioned fact that every state controls access to political decision-making through a set of formal and informal rules. In this specific context control means that the state limits the *scope* and *reach* of legitimation. In general terms it can be assumed that states which already rely on a legitimation profile with limited scope and reach will be more inclined to recur to this repressive type of response to radical change.

*Facing the delivery challenge:* In a situation of radical change, states often have to compensate for lower levels of public service delivery by employing alternative legitimation modalities. For instance, if radical change is perceived as the outcome of an external threat, rulers may rely on normative legitimation by using symbolic means of integration or appealing to basic principles of the political order, such as solidarity, national sovereignty, etc. This may cause citizens to lower their expectations in terms of service delivery, but it requires a certain amount of legitimacy in the first place.

However, if a state bases its legitimacy to a large extent on material policies (content-based legitimation) or on its leadership and technical management capacities (charismatic, role-based legitimation), a consistent weakness in public service delivery will probably imply a critical loss of legitimacy. A procedure of choice may be to focus content-based legitimation even more in favour of groups who control critical resources (limiting reach), but there are important risks inherent to this strategy, as the level of contestation is also likely to rise.

*Facing the distributional challenge:* Radical change obliges states to account for alterations in the societal distribution of assets and the issues citizens perceive to be important. This may be above all a problem for regimes or individual leaders closely attached to a specific set of values or a particular distributive scheme. States will often modify their spending priorities or mobilize additional resources in order to accommodate changing preferences. It can be assumed, though, that the capacity to raise *additional* resources depends to a considerable degree on the legitimacy a state enjoys – both domestically and internationally.

Still, states may also choose to stifle the articulation of alternative preference orders, limiting the scope and reach of legitimation.<sup>20</sup> This in turn may lead to higher levels of contestation or even delegitimation. In times of radical change, the existing procedures and institutional structures of a political order may be questioned, or there may be a power shift between competing (for instance, traditional and modern) institutional settings. Maintaining legitimacy may require democratic regimes to seek accommodation with traditional forms of rule, in order not to lose touch with local collectivities.

*Facing the mobilisation challenge:* Social mobilization can lead to alternative institutions (procedures and structures) of policy-making, or to the emergence of charismatic leaders challenging the existing regime. Such a development can be a serious threat to regimes already relying on high levels of mobilization (charismatic legitimation). But perhaps even more importantly, political regimes with more institutionalized patterns of legitimation may also experience a critical loss of legitimacy due to mobilization, as it may turn out to be impossible to control the issues raised by the mobilized actors.

Maintaining legitimacy in the face of charismatic contestation is a rather challenging task. A competition between various “mobilisation modes” can lead to total regime collapse. An alternative strategy consists in lowering the level of mobilization by integrating the issues and values raised by the contestator, for instance through a more value-oriented legitimation. Also, states can try to control mobilization through repressive action. Yet again, repressing the articulation of legitimation demands in times of radical change requires a certain amount of procedural legitimacy in the first place. Otherwise, such a strategy has the potential to undermine the legitimacy of the political regime even more.

#### *Legitimacy and the ability to manage change*

In managing radical change, states may suffer legitimacy losses or even crises, but they can also use their legitimacy as an asset, strengthening the efficiency and effectiveness of their actions, promoting collective action and mobilizing additional resources. Also, the impact of radical change on legitimacy does not have to be negative: on the contrary, radical change can at times lead to a decisive (if short-lived) legitimacy boost. For instance, it is not uncommon for political regimes with a critical lack of legitimacy to start external conflicts in order to

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<sup>20</sup> In fact, even the most liberal states suppress alternative preference orders at the margin of their legal and ethical system.

rally their citizens behind them. The accompanying mobilization often helps the incumbent regime, but the move is risky, as the costs of international conflict can lead to diminishing legitimacy later on.

According to their legitimation profiles, states may be more or less tolerant to the stress imposed on them by radical change.

*Delivery:* It can be assumed that states employing procedural, transparent and participative modalities of legitimation should in principle be in a good position to achieve a consensus on the level and composition of public services in the face of radical change. They are better suited to gain acceptance for long-term policies which link present welfare losses to major future welfare gains. An alternative argument, however, would affirm that in such a setting people will look at public services as an acquired right, being rather reluctant to lower their expectations. Rulers may then prefer to sacrifice the future well-being of society for the sake of legitimacy today.

On the other hand, political regimes based on more adaptable and flexible legitimation modalities may find it easier to shape their supporters' expectations. Also, they may react to critical losses of legitimacy in specific policy fields or vis-à-vis particular political actors by drawing on well-focussed material policies or value messages. Hence, their performance may be superior in the short run. In the long run, however, these regimes have to struggle with higher costs and higher probabilities of contestation linked to their legitimation modality.

*Distribution:* In order to manage change, information is critical. Political regimes with regular transparent, free and fair elections (procedural legitimation) generate more information on the preferences and attitudes of citizens than regimes without (or with flawed) elections. Related to this, political regimes with a higher degree of decentralization are in a better position to receive information from and respond to local communities. To be sure, information per se does not bring about legitimacy, but it helps states to shape their response to radical change according to the legitimation demands of their constituency, and to address issues of equity and equality at an early stage of the political process and based on institutionalized procedures.

At the same time, though, it is fair to assume that political regimes with a broad-reach legitimation are much more sensible when it comes to distribution, as they aim at integrating many political actors. For the same reason they will probably be less flexible in the case of conflicting preference orders. Regimes with a legitimation profile based on limited scope and reach are perhaps in a better situation to respond to this kind of challenges. Still, short-term success may come at the cost of growing contestation and legitimacy problems in the long run. Also, these regimes are obviously much more vulnerable in those cases where the distributive challenge affects their core values, issues or supporting groups.

*Mobilization:* As has been said above, legitimation modalities with a high degree of adaptability (located primarily in the executive branch and with few actors and institutions involved) may facilitate quick adaptation to radical change. Regimes endowed with such a legitimation profile may use their mobilisation power to raise additional resources, demand individual sacrifices and promote collective action. This legitimation is often more expensive and less durable, though, making it necessary to transform it into more institutionalized patterns later on.

In contrast, political orders that base their legitimacy on the broad, institutionalized integration of citizens will be less prone to mobilization and sacrifice. Yet, they possess the impor-

tant advantage of generating a stock of legitimacy and promoting a general level of trust in social relations, making it easier for societal actors to organize collective action and thus putting the collective response to radical change on a broader basis.

## 5. Conclusion

From the discussion in the preceding chapter a first important conclusion can be drawn: the 'degree of legitimacy' a given political order enjoys at a given moment in time does not in itself constitute a valid indicator of its ability to manage a situation of radical change and to maintain its legitimacy. A regime (i.e., a specific historical constellation of rule) may be widely hailed for its achievements on a key political issue, only to be harshly criticized for its negligence concerning another (and suddenly much more important) issue shortly afterwards.

Obviously, the opposite is also possible: a regime with a weak legitimacy may suddenly acquire additional legitimacy if it performs well on a specific subject. This happens, for instance, in cases of external aggression, when people tend to rally around their leaders even if they consider them complete failures on key domestic issues. Radical change may provide an important opportunity to strengthen the legitimacy of political rule, if a regime happens to represent the "right" values or the "most adequate" approach to change.

Rather than legitimacy, it is the *legitimation profile* of a political order that shapes its capacity to manage change. In this context, some legitimation modalities appear to have certain characteristics which enhance the capability of states to swiftly react to radical change. These are modalities with a limited scope or reach, with legitimation concentrated in the executive branch of the government and involving few actors, and with a high mobilisation capacity.

Political regimes with this kind of legitimation profiles may even benefit from radical change, at least in the short run, even though they are at the same time more vulnerable to radical change if it affects their core issues, values or supporters. In the longer run, the costs of this kind of legitimation will probably rise and there will be a growing pressure to transform legitimation into more institutionalized modalities (or accepting lower levels of legitimacy and becoming more repressive).

Other legitimation modalities appear to be less flexible. Procedural or normative modalities with broad scope and reach may be rather slow in reacting to radical change. They are also less likely to benefit from this situation in the short run. However, these modalities (in case they have been employed successfully before radical change occurs) carry a stock of legitimacy crucial to manage change from a longer-term perspective. They may also be superior in generating reliable information on societal expectations and legitimation demands.

The concept of legitimation presented in this paper allows us to assess a state's ability to manage radical change by looking at the four dimensions of scope, reach, adaptability and cost. In terms of measurement and empirical evidence, however, more work has to be done. Recent approaches to measuring legitimacy (for instance, Gilley 2006) are based almost exclusively on the concept of procedural legitimacy, with a broad scope and reach. There is very little evidence concerning legitimation directed towards particular groups, or the costs of legitimation for political regimes. A scorecard approach as suggested in this paper may be useful to complement existing efforts and to account for other legitimation modalities.

Finally, studies on legitimacy are increasingly confronted with the problem of *congruence*: Traditionally, political analysis worked under the assumption that regulations and allocations,



on the one hand, and legitimacy, on the other, were produced by the same actors and at the same place within a political order. In a growing number of policy areas, however, this is no longer the case. While regulations and allocations are produced more and more through markets, networks, civil society organizations and international bodies, legitimation remains largely a function of the nation-state.

As a consequence, states face legitimation problems as a reaction to performance deficits that escape their scope of action. At the same time, external actors are increasingly able to legitimize or de-legitimize the political order (even though the latter appears to be much easier than the former). Looking at the strategic procurement of legitimacy may provide additional information on the addressees (the reach) of legitimation.

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