

What is Government Legitimacy? (Part I)

Many people think that the legitimacy of government depends on how it is perceived by its citizens. I share this view, but in my opinion, it doesn't tell us very much. It's clear that a state or a government has weak legitimacy when citizens's views of it are extremely negative. But does a state have strong legitimacy when citizens' perceptions are positive?

If we look closer, it's clear that not just any positive perception will do. Popular support for governments can be superficial, based on celebrity or tribalism. The popular support that translates into legitimacy, in contrast, has to *enable* government to deliver benefits to all. This implies that citizens' support for government has to be more concrete than some vaguely positive feelings. I would argue that there must be positive perceptions of government along three distinct dimensions. First, the dimension of competence: government must be seen as capable and effective in carrying out its activities. Second, the dimension of fairness: government must be seen as treating all people equally and impartially, without favoritism or discrimination. And third, the dimension of human concern and personal connectedness: government must be seen as sincerely caring about each person's welfare. Only when the government is seen as competent, fair, and caring does it have the kind of support that amounts to legitimacy.

These three dimensions – competence, fairness, and caring – are all necessary, but they can be separated. A lack of any one of them is enough to weaken legitimacy. For instance, if the government is perceived as unfair, then its legitimacy is reduced even if it is otherwise seen as being competent and caring. Consider a real-world example. The head of OfGem, a regulatory body in the UK, recently expressed concern about the emergence of a “two-tier” energy market, noting that wealthier households are likely to invest in self-generating technology such as solar panels. A trend in this direction would make average energy consumption both cleaner and cheaper, an outcome that would allow the regulator to be seen as caring about the environment while efficiently managing energy consumption. However, the trend would also raise the relative prices of energy for less wealthy households, as compared to wealthy households. The OfGem head fears that this could “undermine the legitimacy” of energy markets, implying that it would be perceived as unfair.¹ The head is right to be worried about this, because overseeing a system whose pricing seems unfair could weaken the legitimacy of the regulator, even if it is otherwise seen to be competent and caring. This real world case shows how the government can be perceived as caring and competent, but nevertheless not be perceived as fair.

No doubt the three dimensions are related and mutually reinforcing. However, the fact that they can come apart shows that the three positive perceptions have to be maintained separately, for they can be lost separately. In fact, the three factors sometimes pull in opposite directions. This means that various government agencies have to engage in a

¹ *The Economist*. 2017. “Is Britain’s Energy System Broken?,” October 19, 2017. <https://www.economist.com/news/britain/21730454-it-may-be-less-sickly-politicians-claim-britains-energy-system-broken>.

balancing act in order to ensure that their behavior is simultaneously seen as caring, fair, and competent. Sometimes there might be pressure to make tradeoffs. For example, a police force with insufficient resources might be confronted with a dilemma: in order to maintain perceived competence with fewer resources, they need to cut back on some of the very practices that allowed them to be viewed as caring, such as making home visits to each victim.

This balancing act is made even more difficult in large welfare states. Public administration requires a bureaucracy in order to provide efficient oversight and assure people of fair treatment. At the same time, the bureaucracy often reduces the effectiveness of service delivery at the point of need. It can even make the treatment of citizens so routinized and impersonal that it is experienced as alienating and inhumane. The film [*I, Daniel Blake*](#) poignantly shows the devastating human impact of the bureaucracy in Britain's benefits programmes. It is no wonder, then, that even when societies make progress in terms of education, wealth, and human rights, the legitimacy of the government does not improve.

The bottom line is that governments must find ways of operating that enable citizens to see them as competent, fair, and caring. But it is harder than ever to secure all of these positive perceptions at once. For when the government is perceived as lacking on one of these dimensions, it can affect its ability to maintain a positive image on the other dimensions. When this happens, it is very hard for government to get "credit" for its actions, even when its behavior counts by objective standards as competent, fair, and caring. This leads to a downward spiral of illegitimacy in which the behaviors and practices that used to work simply don't work anymore. In my view, many countries in the world today are on a slippery slope, trapped in a reinforcing cycle of negative perceptions that threatens to put legitimacy out of reach. Governments urgently need to reverse this trend and renew their legitimacy, as the stakes will only get higher.