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The political economy of legitimacy: A theoretical framework on the effect of legitimacy on favouritism in distribution

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Abstract
Legitimacy forms the cornerstone of democratic governance and ensures that the exercise of political power reflects the consent of the governed. While a substantial body of literature has examined the determinants and consequences of political legitimacy, the effects of legitimacy on the use of favouritism in distributive politics remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap in the literature by theorizing a link between the lack of legitimacy of governments and their propensity to use favouritism as a political strategy. It argues that a deficit in legitimacy generates political insecurity among incumbents, increasing their likelihood of resorting to favouritism in the distribution of public resources to increase political support. Relying on theoretical insights from the political business cycle and distributive politics literature, this study posits that a lack of legitimacy correlates with higher levels of favouritism in distribution by an incumbent. The arguments contribute conceptually to two streams of studies in politics: legitimacy and distributive politics. They highlight how legitimacy influences both the macropolitical as well as micropolitical dynamics of the relationship between incumbent and citizens. The paper concludes that political insecurity arising from weak legitimacy incentivizes short-term favouritism, which, paradoxically, may further lessen institutional trust and political stability.

Keywords: Legitimacy, favouritism, distributive politics, political insecurity, democratic governance, political business cycle, electoral legitimacy, resource distribution

Introduction

For democratic politics, the legitimacy of the government in power is very significant since the very basis of democratic power is the legitimate bestowal of power from the demos to the representative. Scholarly works on legitimacy have been concerned with understanding what constitutes the legitimacy of a government (Montanaro, 2012; Anderson *et al*. 2005; Weatherford, 1992; Morlino and Montero, 1995) [14, 2., 18, 15], what affects it (Anderson *et al*., 2005; Mishler and Rose, 1997; Anderson and Tverdova, 2003) [2, 13, 1] and how it affects other arenas of politics and economy (Bornschier, 1989; Weede, 1996) [4, 19].

While this array of literature explores a wide range of dynamics relevant to the legitimacy of government, studies on the effects of legitimacy on the use of favouritism have been relatively scant. This gap in the literature limits our scholarly understanding in two ways. Firstly, since the concentration of the literature on legitimacy has been profusely on what affects legitimacy and how legitimacy affects the overall economy of a country, the effect of legitimacy on political tools such as the use of favouritism has been overlooked. Nevertheless, as perceptions of the legitimacy of government are likely to condition the sense of political confidence in the politicians in power, a lack of legitimacy is likely to lead to political insecurity in the incumbent.

Since previous literature suggests that insecurity can lead to the use of favouritism, we should examine whether a lack of legitimacy increases the probability of the use of favouritism by the incumbent by inducing insecurity. This study examines the effect of legitimacy on the use of favouritism as a political tool and proposes a theoretical framework on approaching this effect. More specifically, it argues that the legitimacy of the government in power has a negative effect on the probability of favouritism in the distributive politics of the incumbent. That is, a country with less legitimacy will have higher favouritism in the distribution of government resources. The lack of legitimacy in the form of a lack of public support for the winner in election is a dominant phenomenon present all over the world. It can be seen in electoral denialism in countries of the developed world such as the United States in addition to the ever-present refusal of election results in many countries of the developing world. These governments facing a lack of popular support are likely to be politically insecure due to the shaky support base and therefore, incumbents might resort to favouritism as a means to gain public support in a short time.

There are indications in the literature that a lack of legitimacy is likely to induce political insecurity in the incumbent (Pluta, 2022) [12]. Previous literature also suggests that electoral insecurity can lead to increased use of favouritism. As Schultz (1995) [16] shows in a study on the political business cycle, governments that are more insecure about the probability of reelection are more likely to manipulate the economy prior to an election. Similarly, Chang (2005) [6] finds that the electoral uncertainty of candidates before an election is a significant driver of their using corruption for financing campaigns. Building on these, this paper argues that incumbents that have a lack of legitimacy are more likely to resort to favouritism due to their sense of insecurity.

The theory presented in this paper joins two streams of studies in politics, legitimacy and distributive politics, to examine the effect of legitimacy on favouritism in distributive politics. Going beyond the temporal explanation of election, it aims to examine the effect on distributive politics irrespective of elections since a lack of legitimacy will not only drive electoral insecurity rather will be a risk for the existing power of the incumbent (Anderson *et al*. 2005) [2]. This study aims to contribute to the existing literature in three key ways. First, it will extend our understanding of the effect of legitimacy as an explanatory variable on the use of favouritism. Second, it will also contribute to the literature on distributive politics by adding a new dimension of understanding what conditions the incentives of the politicians in power to disproportionately distribute resources. Finally, it will extend the political business cycle literature by looking at the similar reasoning behind electoral insecurity and corruption, but beyond the temporal boundary of election.

In the following discussion, the study explains the contending explanations of the concept of legitimacy and reviews the works on the effects of legitimacy, arguing that a deficit in legitimacy generates political insecurity among incumbents, increasing their likelihood of resorting to favouritism in the distribution of public resources to consolidate support.

The concept of legitimacy

In democratic settings, a key stabilizing element of a government is its legitimacy. Since democratic systems lie upon the principle of citizens' support, it is crucial that an elected regime have a sufficient basis of legitimacy. The authority of a democratic government is accepted to be legitimate based on the idea of including the *demos* of the state through the right to vote and representation (Montanaro, 2012) [14]. In his classical work, Easton (1965) emphasizes the role of citizens in the formation of the legitimacy of a government by noting that the support of citizens to trust the government significantly affects its legitimacy. This supports that underlies the legitimacy of democratic government does not necessarily mean the direct vote of citizens for the winner in the election per se, rather it refers to the belief that 'the political system will generally produce good outcomes' (Anderson *et al*. 2005) [2]. Easton differentiates between two forms of support: diffused support referring to support entailed from socialization and specific support referring to support based on particularistic benefits.

However, going beyond Easton's support framework, the concept of the legitimacy of government in democratic settings has been studied from a multitude of perspectives. Much of the research has focused on explaining what factors influence legitimacy and explained them from both macro as well as micro perspectives (Anderson *et al*. 2005, Weatherford, 1992) [2, 18]. As Anderson and colleagues (2005) [2] note, the macro perspectives emphasize the systemic and institutional factors influencing legitimacy whereas the micro perspectives focus on the role of the individual in determining the extent of the legitimacy of an elected government. They tie both the macro and micro perspectives in explaining legitimacy as beliefs of individual citizens in the validity of the government which they argue to be conditional upon institutional aspects.

The theoretical framework presented here underscores the distinction between general legitimacy and democratic legitimacy. A branch of scholarship is concerned with conceptualizing and studying democratic legitimacy in terms of preferences for democracy among citizens. For example, conceptualize democratic legitimacy in terms of citizens' support for democratic regimes as opposed to other forms of regimes such as militarism, authoritarianism, etc. Similarly, Morlino and Montero (1995) [15] explain democratic legitimacy with three forms of support for a democratic form of government motivated by absolute faith in democracy, support as a rejection of alternative forms and support because of the efficiency of a democratic form of government. Also examines the democratic legitimacy of a government in terms of satisfaction with and preference for democracy. In contrast to democratic legitimacy, the legitimacy of a government is the acceptance of individual governments forming as a result of elections. Following the concept of legitimacy as put forward by Anderson *et al*. (2005) [2], this study is interested in the legitimacy of individual governments as reflected in citizens' acceptance. More specifically, legitimacy is interpreted as the winner-loser gap among citizens, since it is an efficient measure of acceptance of the particular government in power at the individual level.

The Economic Effect of Legitimacy

Studies on the legitimacy of government have taken various routes previously. A host of studies have focused on explaining the sources of democratic legitimacy (Rose *et al*., 1998, Morlino and Montero, 1995) [15, 13], others focused on explaining what affects the legitimacy of a government (Anderson *et al*., 2005; Mishler and Rose, 1997; Anderson and Tverdova, 2003) [2, 13, 1]. However, little attention has been paid to studying the effect of legitimacy as an explanatory variable for economic outcomes. Since the legitimacy of governments i.e. the support of citizens towards the validity of the government affects the incentives of people in and out of power, it is fitting to assume that variations in the legitimacy of the government will lead to variations in their activities, including economic ones.

Some forms of this effect have already been found in previous studies of the political business cycle and political security. For example, the effect of legitimacy on economic growth has been studied from a variety of viewpoints. Bornschier (1989) [4] finds that the legitimacy of a government has a positive effect on the economic growth of a country. Weede (1996) [19] extends this argument by showing that this effect is conditional upon several factors including catch-up opportunity, government outlays, etc. examine how the legitimacy of government influences the way government size affects the growth of a country and find that the negative effect of government size on economic growth is larger when the government is perceived to be more legitimate. However, these studies examine the effect of legitimacy on the economy of the country as a whole. Scant attention has been paid to the effect of legitimacy on the activities of the government in terms of the use of favouritism as a political tool.

However, there is reason to believe that legitimacy should also affect the way government uses its expenditure internally since the lack of legitimacy makes politicians insecure about position. In the political business cycle literature, studies have shown that such uncertainty can affect the economic activities of the incumbent at least prior to the election. Schultz (1995) [16] notes that governments are more likely to manipulate the economy prior to an election when it has less political security i.e. reelection chances. Chang (2005) [6] also argues that the electoral uncertainty of candidates before an election is a significant driver of their using corruption for financing campaigns. While these studies are bound to the temporal explanation of electoral incentives, this theoretical framework aims to go beyond the temporal boundaries and examine the effect of legitimacy on incumbents' economic behaviour. Although the causal mechanism of the theory relies on the electoral insecurity argument, it extends beyond the electoral dimension to examine whether the insecurity resulting from a lack of legitimacy affects the distributive politics of the incumbent government.

Legitimacy and Favouritism in Distributive Politics

Relying on studies of the political business cycle and electoral insecurity, this paper argues that the legitimacy of a government has a significant effect on its economic activities in terms of distribution. More specifically, it posits that variations in a government's legitimacy lead to variations in favouritism in distributive politics. This occurs because a government with lower legitimacy, in terms of support from citizens, is naturally more insecure about re-election. The popular perception of the incumbent's legitimacy of power conditions the behaviour of the winners as well as the losers after an election (Anderson, 2005) [2]. In the definition of legitimacy that is followed, a lack of legitimacy indicates that the government has a lack of popular support. With a shaky basis of support among the populace, it is fair to assume that the government will be insecure politically since political insecurity simply refers to the incumbent's lack of confidence for reelection.

As popular support is the prime indicator of prospects of reelection (Schultz, 1995) [16], a lack of legitimacy should be accompanied by political insecurity in the incumbent. Now, previous studies have also found that a politically insecure government is more likely to resort to favouritism for securing more support at the mass level. For example, Schultz (1995) [16] asserts that insecure governments are more likely to use transfer payments to sway key constituencies in their favour. Hence, a government with a lack of popular support, i.e. weak legitimacy is more likely to use favouritism as a tool in distributive politics so as to gain better support from the citizens for improved chances of reelection.

Why is an insecure incumbent likely to resort to favouritism? This is because incumbents that are insecure due to weak legitimacy use favouritism as a shortcut to gain support from subsections of the populace that are more likely to come in favor of the incumbent. Depending on the nature of politics in the country in question, this targeting of favouritism can happen in a number of ways. For example, previous studies have suggested that in developed political settings, favouritism can be used through pork-barrel politics targeted to partisan groups of the populace such as regions with large farms and more partisan competition (Cadot *et al*. 2006) [5]. In less-developed contexts, favouritism can be channelled more in regions with a greater concentration of co-ethnics or co-religious groups (Teitelbaum & Thachil 2010, Banerjee & Somanathan 2007, Haass and Ottmann 2021) [17, 3, 10]. Since these groups are easier to target and are conventionally used as shortcut means of generating support at the mass level, an insecure incumbent with easy access to government resources is more likely to use favouritism targeting these easy-to-identify and geographically targetable groups to gain support at the mass level.

Favouritism is more likely to be used than programmatic politics since favouritism is more likely to bring about more support with less investment. The target of an insecure government is convincing as many supporters as possible with the limited resources at their disposal and therefore will try to benefit by targeting existing and probable supporters for preferential distribution instead of programmatic distribution. On the other hand, when a government has higher legitimacy, it means that it is well supported by the majority populace and the elites in the government will not want to risk their reputation by disproportionately favouring some over others. Based on this theoretical grounding, we can argue that in a cross-country comparison, a government with less legitimacy will have higher favouritism in distribution.

When a government is less stable or there is a lack of acceptance of the legitimacy of the power of the elites in the government, they will be more likely to resort to favoritism in distribution. On the other hand, when a government is stable and popularly accepted, favoritism in distribution will be less likely to be present. This is because when the power transition process is clear and unquestioned, it means that the government is well supported by the majority and the elites in the government will not want to risk their reputation by disproportionately favoring some over others. On the contrary, those with a shaky basis of legitimacy will try to secure their position by convincing as many supporters as possible and therefore will try to benefit by targeting existing and probable supporters for preferential distribution.

To elaborate more on this theory, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by favouritism in this study, how it is linked with legitimacy and the gap in the literature that this theory tries to fulfil in this study. Distributive politics is one of the key areas where the government has the opportunity to manipulate government resources for political purposes. A large body of literature has examined favouritism in distributive politics in terms of drivers, effects, conditions, etc. (Golden and Picci, 2008) [9]. Distributive politics is defined as politically motivated allocations by the politicians in power aimed at electoral gains by targeting specific groups of voters. By favouritism in distributive politics, this study refers to the targeting of the disproportionate distribution of these resources to population subgroups based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, geography, etc. However, there is a significant gap in the literature on favouritism as there is scant discussion on the role of legitimacy in triggering the use of favouritism. Much of the literature concerned with favouritism in distributive politics is focused on who the most likely targets of the distribution are, what the timeframe of the distribution might be and whether the distribution yield positive results in terms of increasing votes.

For example, Golden and Picci (2008) [9] examine the target of the distribution and finds that in the open-list PR system of Italy, individually powerful legislators from the government parties direct more resources to their core supporters in the home districts in order to prevent them from switching vote to the other local candidates. On the other hand, finds a different scenario in the ethnically segregated political context of Africa. Utilizing the fact that both ethnic groups and crop types are geographically concentrated in Africa, the author shows that the co-ethnic farmers of the African leaders actually face a higher tax. This is because the African leaders secure the support of these core voters through intermediaries, and these core voters seldom have alternative candidates. Therefore, the leaders can tax their own higher without fearing loss of support. Haass and Ottmann's (2021) [10] work adds new insights to this analysis, showing that unlike the patterns found by Kasara (2007), rebel elites tend to give favours more to their core supporters in their respective ethnic regions.

Although the importance of the support of the citizens has been noted as an important driver behind favouritism in distributive politics in these studies, how the perception of legitimacy affects this distribution has not been given scholarly attention. This theoretical framework argues that the lack of legitimacy induces political insecurity in the incumbent and therefore, the incumbent resorts to favouritism as a shortcut means of securing public support. From the political business cycle and electoral insecurity literature, we know that electoral insecurity conditions the activities of the politicians in power. A government with less legitimacy in terms of acceptance among citizens should be insecure not only before the election but also for its existing power since a large lack of acceptance can have a severe effect on the government (Anderson *et al*. 2005) [2]. Hence, it is probable that a less legitimate government is likely to seek ways to increase support for its survival. Since distributive politics is a much-used avenue to seek support, they are likely to resort to distributing disproportionately in order to strengthen their support base.

This political insecurity stemming from the lack of legitimacy does not only arise from objective electoral threats but also from perceived vulnerabilities among the governing elites. Leaders may overestimate the risk of losing office, particularly in contexts with contentious elections or weak institutions. This heightened perception of threat incentivizes incumbents to prioritize short-term gains in political support through targeted resource distribution. In this sense, favouritism functions as a low-cost yet high-return mechanism to stabilize the ruling party's political position, especially when regular policy making or institutional tools are insufficient to secure a positive perception among the citizens.

However, it is important to note that while favoritism may provide short-term political security, it can have long-term consequences for governance and trust in institutions. Systematic targeting of specific groups is likely to erode public confidence in impartial governance and undermine institutional legitimacy further. Paradoxically, actions taken to counter low legitimacy through favoritism may reinforce perceptions of partiality and inefficiency, creating a feedback loop where incumbents remain insecure and increasingly reliant on targeted distribution.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The existing literature on legitimacy does not account for the effect of legitimacy on the use of favouritism as a political tool by the government. However, as studies on the political business cycle and electoral insecurity indicate, the confidence of the politicians in power is a significant determinant of their attitude towards the distribution of resources. Incumbents who are more insecure about reelection are more likely to resort to corruption and manipulate the economy. However, there is no reason that this effect should only be limited to the temporal boundary of elections. Rather, the confidence of the politicians in power should be affected by their acceptance among the citizens, i.e. the legitimacy of the respective governments. As Anderson *et al*. (2005) [2] suggest, this acceptance significantly affects the behaviour of those in and out of politics. Therefore, it is likely that the governments with less legitimacy will be less confident about their power and will therefore seek ways to gain more support from the citizens through disproportionate distribution.

In this theoretical framework, it has been argued that when a government has less legitimacy in terms of acceptance among the citizens, it is more likely to have favouritism in distribution. Going forward, future research may explore the causal mechanisms linking legitimacy and favoritism with empirical data. While this study theorizes that political insecurity mediates the relationship, empirical work can examine the effect of additional pathways including elite competition, media framing, and social mobilization. In empirical examination, cross national large-N quantitative studies can be useful for getting a macro perspective on this relationship. In addition, comparative case studies can also be useful for investigating this relationship at a micro-level and examine how exactly the lack of legitimacy might lead to a higher propensity for favouritism.

Additionally, future research can also examine the long-term consequences of favouritism driven by low legitimacy on overall political stability and social outcomes. As discussed in the earlier section, while disproportionate distribution may provide short-term political gains, it may also undermine trust in institutions, intensify inequalities in society, and weaken citizens' confidence in democratic processes. Longitudinal studies can be useful in investigating whether repeated cycles of favouritism create feedback loops that further erode legitimacy or instead they go on to establish clientelist networks. Exploring these dynamics would not only deepen our understanding of the interplay between legitimacy and distributive politics but also help improve policy interventions aimed at promoting more equitable and stable governance.

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