

Theme Statement for the 2017 APSA Annual Meeting

The Quest for Legitimacy: Actors, Audiences and Aspirations

The concept of legitimacy is fundamental to many classic debates in political science. At the same time, legitimacy is core to numerous contemporary political issues. Across the world and our discipline questions about political legitimacy ensue. Salient debates—whether about representation, equality, voice, accountability, institutionalization, protest, revolutions, international norms, disputes, war—can all contain questions of legitimacy at their core. Moments of social and political change often center on contestation about what is considered legitimate, including some of the more prominent movements in the last several years, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, Arab Spring protests, the global refugee crises, increasing nationalism and xenophobia in established democracies, debates about universal health care and other social policies, environmental regulations, the rights of minority groups, and the apparent widespread increases in inequality. Legitimacy is also closely tied to numerous core concepts, including the creation of order, the exercise of power, and the nature and role of political authority. Yet the concept of legitimacy is contested, and within political science there is wide variation in what scholars mean when they reference the term.

This year's conference theme is *The Quest for Legitimacy*. We encourage submissions that tackle questions of legitimacy with special attention to the following sub-themes. What is legitimacy? Who bestows legitimacy? What are the processes underlying the legitimation of actors, institutions, aspirations, and political goals? Are there multiple forms of legitimacy? And do they vary according to the international, domestic, societal and private spheres? What is considered legitimate? How is it defined? Operationalized? Even measured? Is it based on a universal set of understandings? Moral commitments? Or simply the outcomes of power struggles? What role do political scientists play in the legitimation process? What is legitimate to study or not study? And what makes a set of political phenomena more legitimate than others?

We encourage participants in APSA 2017 to reflect on what legitimacy means in their areas of research, and to consider proposing a theme panel on a relevant question. The conference theme pertains to both the determinants of legitimacy and the consequences of legitimacy (or a lack thereof). It also includes those who are viewed as legitimate or potentially legitimate actors and those audiences who may have the power to confer or revoke legitimacy. As legitimacy is a topic that crosses many traditional divides in Political Science, theme panels that consider a relevant question from the perspectives of multiple subfields are particularly welcome.

Legitimacy is interesting and challenging in part because it is an inherently social phenomenon, constituted both by claims to this special status and the recognition bestowed by others. Presentations that connect legitimacy to aspirations of social and political change and processes are also encouraged. The link between scholarship on legitimacy and its practical relevance becomes most apparent, in our view, when we discuss moments in which legitimacy is created, diminished, or contested. For activists seeking social change, embattled leaders facing a political uprising, or fledgling institutions, understanding changes in legitimacy may be both essential and especially difficult. We hope that by directing attention to this important topic at the 2017 annual meeting, scholars will be encouraged to consider how the concept of legitimacy informs their own research, how other subfields may consider the topic differently, and how research can speak more powerfully to some of the more pressing questions of our time.