

RESEARCH NOTE

Thick or Thin?: An Empirical Intervention

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ABSTRACT *This note provides evidence about the relationship between state legitimacy and liberal rights in 72 states, and compares the strength of that relationship to other plausible legitimacy sources. It concludes that liberal rights have an equal but non-superordinate status to good governance and material development. The 'thick' versus 'thin' argument about an appropriate global theory of state legitimacy may be misplaced. In its place, we should adopt a partial and plural approach.*

KEY WORDS: Legitimacy, governance, liberal rights, consultation hierarchy, urgent rights, development, tradeoffs

Introduction

A central debate in contemporary politics concerns the content of a globally valid theory of state legitimacy. The debate has been characterized as one between advocates of 'thick' and 'thin' conceptions (Walzer 1994). The former refers to conceptions that require the provision of an extensive list of liberal rights (Buchanan 2003; Donnelly 2003; Caney 2004; Talbott 2005; Beitz 1999). The latter refers to conceptions that limit those rights to a more immediate and thus presumptively more universal list, represented best by the 'tolerant liberalism' of Rawls (Rawls 1999), but also advocated from sovereignist (Nardin 1983; Rabkin 2005) and relativist/pluralist (Bell 2000, 2006) positions by others. In its popular manifestation, the debate pits advocates of liberal universalism against those who downplay liberal rights in favor of various putative alternatives – American exceptionalism, Asian Values, African

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Values, Islamic theocracy, Bolívarism, Westphalianism and more. Talbott calls it 'the most divisive issue in the interpretation of human rights' (Talbott 2005: 9).

Since this debate has large implications for the efficacy of humanitarian intervention and human-rights diplomacy, it is widely debated in international relations. Those who urge aggressive border-crossing tend to support the empirical validity of the 'thick' approach (Lewy 1993), while those who urge limits on that right tend to see a 'thin' empirical reality (Chandler 2004). More broadly, the debate taps into a question about the universality of the liberal experience and the implications for the sorts of theories and models we use to study non-Western states.

The 'thick versus thin' debate hinges on an important empirical question: what is the actual legitimating value placed on the extensive list of liberal rights by most people in most countries in the world? While empirical evidence of the subjective views of citizens is insufficient, it is a necessary starting point for any normative theory of legitimacy that claims global validity. At the very least, any normative account that flatly contradicted the considered views of billions of global citizens in a variety of settings would have to explain why it had a superior claim to truth. Moreover, it would ignore the question of feasibility for any internationally agreed standard of legitimacy, an important second-order moral consideration.

Reidy is doubtless correct that Rawls, like other advocates of thin principles, 'does not aim to show this by conducting an empirical search for ... a focal point of consensus' (Reidy 2006: 178), since that would make it 'political in the wrong way', as Rawls often warned (Rawls 1996: 142). Rather, his aim was to provide a reasoned argument for thinness. But the factual basis of his reasoning was precisely a series of unstated empirical assumptions. A global theory of state legitimacy, he said, should be a 'realistic utopia' that was 'workable and applicable' (Rawls 1999a: 13) in the world as we find it. To borrow MacLeod's terms, such principles needed to be *both* justifiable and enforceable (MacLeod 2006). Empiricism plays an important role in the debate about a global theory of legitimacy, whether it is explicit or not.

Claims and counter-claims about the empirical question have generally proceeded in an unscientific fashion. Rawls's belief that 'non-liberal' peoples existed, indeed may be more common than liberal peoples, spawned a debate that has suffered from 'selection bias' (seeking examples that confirm a hypothesis) as well as a lack of agreed method for what constitutes proof in any particular case. Flaherty, for example, rightly notes that 'what passes for "realistic" ... cannot be gauged without some notion of how far, and how fast, principles of justice have already been translated into binding norms across international borders' (Flaherty 2004: 1791). Yet his evidence concerns the rise of the international human-rights movement, which may have a weak relationship to actual citizen beliefs in most countries. By contrast, Huntington's broad claims about the irrelevance of liberal rights to most of the non-Western world fails to account for the large number of liberal democracies outside of the West, and does not make clear the assumed connection between reasoned arguments about cultural traditions and actual evidence of modern-day realities (Huntington 1996).

In this note, I seek to shed light on this empirical issue. My findings are, first, that an extensive list of liberal rights appear to be as widely valued by non-Western as by

Western peoples and thus they do *not* need to be whittled down to fit a ‘non-liberal’ world; but, second, that liberal rights do *not* enjoy trump status over the claims of good governance and development, both of which are as widely valued and can be normatively justified.

Rawls was thus only partly right in his attempts in *The Law of Peoples* to formulate a universally-valid theory of legitimacy. The best solution, it turns out, is not to adjust the *content* of rights, as Rawls did, but rather to adjust their *status* vis-à-vis other principles. Global citizens *do* value liberal rights, but they also value good governance and material development, and the tradeoffs among them (as with tradeoffs within the list of liberal rights) can only be decided through fair processes by the political communities themselves.

There is a substantial literature on the empirical links among development, democracy, and governance that has obvious implications for the findings here. I leave that debate aside however since it goes beyond the prior question of their relative status as sources of subjective legitimacy, which is my primary concern. I also leave aside the question of how actual peoples choose among the three. This requires detailed case studies that are a logical extension of, but not a necessary ingredient to, the inquiry here.

Rights, Governance and Development

Legitimacy refers to the rightfulness of a political object, in this case the rightfulness of the state. In an earlier paper, I conceptualized and measured state legitimacy in 72 states containing 83% of the world’s population in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Gilley 2006b). Following Beetham (1991), rightfulness is defined in terms of three sub-types of legality, moral justification and citizen consent. These three constitutive sub-types were measured using both attitudinal and behavioral data and then aggregated using convergent data. The histogram in Figure 1 shows the average legitimacy scores by region on the 0–10 scale.

Next, I tested various hypothesized sources of legitimacy using simple correlation coefficients (Gilley 2006a).¹ This showed that three variables of development (gains in the Human Development Index), liberal rights (the Freedom House civil liberties indicator), and good governance (the World Bank Institute’s rule of law, control of corruption, and government effectiveness indicators) had an equal claim to cross-national validity as sources of legitimacy. Since only 20 of the 72 states are found in the traditional West, this is preliminary evidence of the co-equal universality of these three variables.

In Table 1, I take these three variables (each operationalized using an additional indicator) and consider whether their performance weakens in various sub-sets of the 72 states. The results show that there is a notable decline in the strength of the liberal rights relationship outside of the West, although this weakening *diminishes* when post-communist Europe (often considered part of the West) is excluded. However, development and governance exhibit similar magnitudes of decline across the various subsets of countries (with or without postcommunist Europe). This is

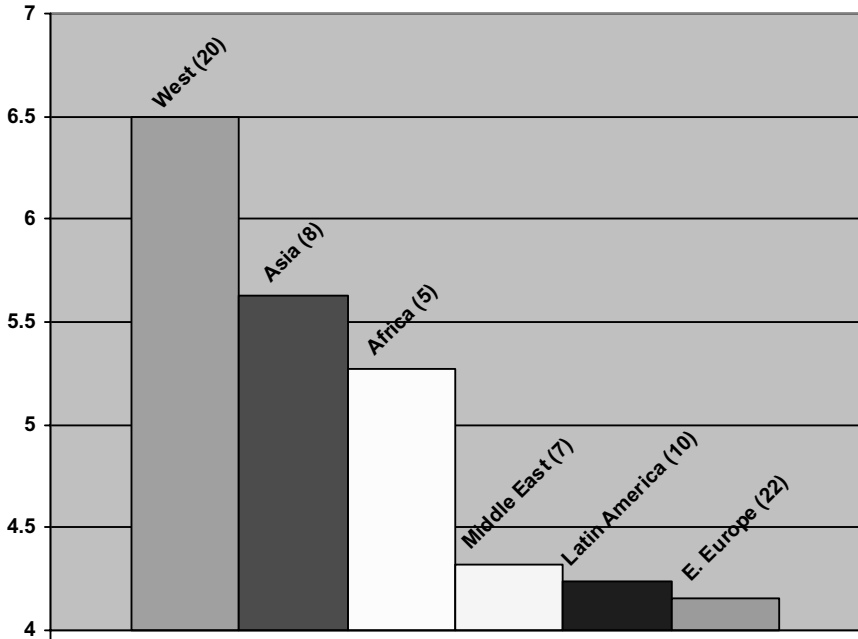


Figure 1. Average legitimacy scores by region (0–10 scale; number of cases in parentheses)

then the first reason for seeing liberal rights as *no less universal* than development or governance.

Could it be that a thinner conception of legitimacy would be more universal? As stated by Rawls, the aim of the *Law of Peoples* was to be ‘universal in reach’ while

Table 1. Legitimacy and Its Correlates (correlation *r*).

	All States (n=72)	Western only (n=20)	Excluding Western (n=52)	Excluding Western and Post- communist Europe (n=30)
Liberal Rights 1	0.58	0.41	0.22	0.33
Liberal Rights 2	0.62	0.59	0.27	0.32
Governance 1	0.72	0.45	0.43	0.42
Governance 2	0.71	0.54	0.37	0.37
Development 1	0.53	0.28	0.29	0.26
Development 2	0.42	0.31	0.32	0.36

Notes: Liberal Rights 1: World Bank Institute, Voice and Accountability, 2000; Liberal Rights 2: Freedom House Civil Liberties, 1999–2000; Governance 1: World Bank Institute, Government Effectiveness, 2000; Governance 2: World Bank Institute, Control of Corruption, 2000; Development 1: Percentage gain in logit value of Human Development Index, 1990–2001; Development 2: Average annual growth in gross domestic product per capita 1990–2002 discounted to account for ‘catch-up’ growth. See Gilley (2006a) for further details.

at the same time establishing a tolerable limit on what a legitimate regime could look like (Rawls 1999a: 86, 80; 1999b: 554–555). The assumption was that the number of ‘outliers’ would be reduced if less demanding requirements were used. All states that met his looser definition were ‘decent’. States that failed to meet it were either ‘outlaw states’ or ‘burdened societies’, neither of which could be considered as legitimate.

The thin conception of legitimacy offered by Rawls had two primary features. One was the shift from a thick set of liberal rights to a thinner list of ‘urgent rights’. Here associational and expression rights could be curtailed, and expansive gender and social rights could be excluded altogether. One way to test this is to consider all states that fail the most minimal of civil liberties protections. Thirteen of our 72 states had Freedom House scores of 5–7 on the inverted 1–7 scale for civic freedoms in 1999–2000 – meaning that they were characterized by: high levels of ‘censorship, political terror, and the prevention of free association’ (5); ‘severely restricted rights of expression and association ... and political prisoners and other manifestations of political terror’ (6); or ‘virtually no freedom ... and an overwhelming and justified fear of repression’ (7). We can code these states as failing to protect urgent rights (what I call the Thin Rights 1 series). The other 59 all upheld urgent rights. Does this in fact improve the ‘fit’? We code states whose legitimacy on the 0–10 scale exceeds 4 as being legitimate (56 of the 72), giving us two lists of dichotomous variables. As Table 2 shows, the correlation between them is weak (in fact it makes the fit slightly worse). We find that six of the 13 states that failed to protect urgent rights – China, Uganda, Algeria, Iran, Egypt, and Belarus – were nonetheless minimally legitimate, confounding the claim that the protection of such rights is necessary for legitimacy. Here, thinness does not make for more universality. States that violate urgent rights are not more roundly condemned than states that violate liberal rights. Or put another way, people’s sense of obligation is not lessened more by the violation of urgent rights than liberal rights.

Alternatively, we could use a different measure such as the Cingranelli–Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Dataset Physical Integrity Index that measures indicators of torture, extrajudicial killing, political imprisonment, and disappearances (Thin Rights 2 series). Since this is a continuous variable, we test it against the continuous legitimacy scores for all 72 states. Again, the use of a thinner definition of rights does not make for more universality.

Table 2. Thin Rights and Legitimacy (correlation *r*).

	All States (n=72)	Western only (n=20)	Excluding Western (n=52)	Excluding Western and Post- communist Europe (n=30)
Thin Rights 1	0.35	N/A ^a	0.24	0.20
Thin Rights 2	0.46	0.22	0.12	0.31

Note: Thin Rights 1: Coded 0 if the state had a Freedom House Civil Liberties score of 5, 6, or 7 in 1999–2000, and 1 if not. a: Since there is no variation (all states are legitimate and all respect urgent rights) the correlation is incomputable for Western states. Thin Rights 2: Cingranelli–Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Dataset Physical Integrity Index

The second feature of the Rawlsian ‘decent’ regime was that it maintained a ‘consultation hierarchy’. Here, while there were no direct elections, all groups were represented and had a voice in public-policy decisions, while state officials and judges worked sincerely to implement the ‘common good idea of justice’ that informed those deliberations. The rulers were bound to ‘weigh the views and claims of each of the bodies consulted’ and if necessary defend policy decisions to them in a way consistent with some shared public reason (Rawls 1999a: 71–78).

Doyle has identified some Arab micro-states as plausible examples of the Rawlsian consultation hierarchy (Doyle 2006), while other authoritarian micro-states like Singapore and Tonga have been cited as other possible examples. While offering the possibility of exceptions, such cases do not answer the general question of whether consultation hierarchies tend to be legitimate. Rather we should consider *all* states that are undemocratic and see if those with consultation hierarchies tend to be legitimate. In our measure, 12 of our 72 states (17%) are undemocratic – meaning they fall into one of the three authoritarian categories of Diamond’s five-part regime typology (Diamond 2002). (The proportion of all global states that is undemocratic is roughly 35%, according to Freedom House.) The existence of consultative arrangements can be measured using the Executive Constraint variable of the Polity IV dataset for the year 2000, defined as: ‘the extent of institutionalized constraints on the decision-making powers of chief executives, whether individuals or collectivities’ including ‘the ruling party in a one-party state; councils of nobles or powerful advisors in monarchies; the military in coup-prone polities; and in many states a strong, independent judiciary’ (Marshall & Jaggers 2002: 24).²

As Table 3 shows, nine of the 12 undemocratic regimes would qualify as having consultation hierarchies as defined above. Of these nine, seven are also subjectively legitimate. What is particularly notable is that five of these seven are in the Middle East – a sign of the relevance of the Rawlsian scheme to Islamic states, of the sort that his fictional example of Kazanistan was clearly meant to represent. It may also be that China’s institutionalized and legalized regime since 1989 has moved that country closer to the Rawlsian ideal, as Angle has argued (Angle 2005a,b). And Uganda likewise had a plausible claim to a legitimate form of nondemocratic rule under its ‘no party democracy’ of 1986 to 2006 (Apter 1995; Ottaway 1999).

Thus the Rawlsian ideal of a legitimate consultation hierarchy is both a plausible moral ideal and an empirically evident one. Nonetheless, the rarity of this form of political rule means that it gives us very little additional leverage across all states. Moreover, and this is where the uncertainty arises, it is often difficult to know whether such states are legitimate *because of* their consultation hierarchies or *in spite of* them. Consultation hierarchies may be morally valued because they reflect a communal tradition of political participation, or because they are seen as a necessary tradeoff in order to achieve better performance on other dimensions. However, they may instead be delegitimizing and legitimacy in such states is a result of performance on other dimensions which does not depend on the maintenance of undemocratic rule. The fact that rulers in Egypt, Iran and Algeria, to take a few of the examples above, have fought constant battles against democratic demands suggests

Table 3. Legitimate consultation hierarchies among non-democracies.

Country	Executive Constraint Score (1–7)	Consultation Hierarchy?	Subjectively Legitimate?
Algeria	3	Yes	Yes
Azerbaijan	2	No	Yes
Belarus	2	No	Yes
China	3	Yes	Yes
Egypt	3	Yes	Yes
Iran	4	Yes	Yes
Jordan	3	Yes	Yes
Morocco	3	Yes	Yes
Pakistan	1	No	No
Russia	5	Yes	No
Uganda	3	Yes	Yes
Zimbabwe	3	Yes	No

that their consultation hierarchies had on balance become delegitimizing by the turn of the century. Uganda’s people dropped their consultation hierarchy in favor of a return to multiparty democracy in 2006. Or, to take an example from outside our set, Pottenger argued in 2004 that Uzbekistan was constructing a harmonious Islamic consultative hierarchy (Pottenger 2004). The following year, a mass pro-democracy movement was crushed with the killing of between 300 and 500 people.³ To the extent that autocracy depended on delivering other morally valued goods like development, failure to do so quickly undermined the form itself (Matveeva 1999: 38). Finding cases of sustainably legitimate consultation hierarchies is rare: either social values change to embrace an individualistic perspective on participation, or else the promised material rewards of autocracy are not forthcoming. In both cases, popular patience with autocrats quickly wears thin.

While we should remain open to the possibilities of legitimate alternatives to democracy, for the most part they are rare. A daunting burden of proof is placed on claims to have found examples, and even then, such claims may be overtaken by events. The democratic ideal remains the most universal precisely because, as Fukuyama argued, it is the only form of political organization whose alternatives do not make universal claims (Fukuyama 1992). Until a universal alternative exists, democracy will remain the most universally legitimizing form of government. Moreover, the empirical evidence of the instrumental benefits of democracy for the achievement of development and governance serves to reinforce the inherent value of this form of government (Halperin & Siegle, 2005). As with rights, thinness on the matter of political participation does not enhance universality.

Thus, a ‘thick’ conception of rights that includes democratic political participation remains the most plausible form of universal rights despite attempts to develop more universal alternatives. On this view, liberal rights do not clash with most of the world’s cultures, even those characterized by a widespread religious belief. As Jewish

Israel, Buddhist Thailand, Islamic Turkey, and recently Hindu Nepal have shown, ‘comprehensive moral doctrines’ and popular demands for liberal rights can coexist. At the same time, liberal rights do not enjoy a superordinate status over the claims of development and governance. As such they are *universal* but *non-superordinate* sources of legitimacy.

A Universal Theory?

All three variables – liberal rights, development, and governance – find their causal importance to subjective views of legitimacy becoming weaker as one expands outside of the traditional West. Should we therefore abandon all attempts at formulating a universal standard of legitimacy?

Certainly we need to be sensitive to the historical particularities that may raise state legitimacy far above, or push it far below, what one would expect based on its performance on universalistic dimensions. Thus, in this period, China (ranked 13th out of 72 states with a legitimacy score of 6.6 on the 0–10 scale) enjoyed legitimacy far greater than would be predicted, while Russia (ranked dead last with 2.3 points) suffered from a legitimacy shortfall far greater than would be predicted.

Yet as a general rule, liberal rights, development and governance together can explain more than half of the legitimacy variations across states.⁴ There is a kernel of truth in the assumption that the world lives at a time where there is a consensus about what it means for a state to be legitimate. We should take this evidence seriously, and use it as the basis for justifying policies that sanction illegitimacy and encourage legitimacy.

The normative question is whether governance and development *should* be accorded the same normative status as liberal rights, which in the liberal tradition enjoy a trump status because of their presumed greater centrality to the fulfillment of most individual life plans. Certainly, there is nothing noxious about citizen desires to enjoy an effective and uncorrupt public service and to expect ongoing improvements in their material condition. Good governance, as Hobbes best explained, is a prerequisite for the freedoms that a civilized society wishes to enjoy. More specifically, the right of access to an effective public service is contained in international human-rights covenants and, on some accounts, is part of a definition of democracy itself (Zakaria 2003).

Broadly shared development, meanwhile, reflects the moral imperatives of a just distribution of economic growth, as well as improvements to one’s material condition (Friedman 2005). The ‘right to development’ is not particular to poor countries but universal to all. Citizens may reasonably curtail some liberal rights to allow governments to establish the conditions for security, effectiveness and economic growth. That does not imply that such rights are not valued, only that they may be weighted less than other pressing concerns in certain circumstances. International law has often been contradictory on this point: the Vienna Declaration of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights under the United Nations, for example, proclaimed both that there was a fundamental right to development and that ‘the

lack of development may not be invoked to justify the abridgement of internationally recognized human rights' (Article 10).

In this sense, states that fail to protect liberal rights but which nonetheless enjoy modest levels of legitimacy should be seen as *laggards* rather than *outliers*: legitimacy under such conditions is most often *in spite of* rather than *because of* a poor liberal rights record. Poor liberal rights records should be seen as a result of either low income levels (which are closely correlated with bad performance of all sorts) or a consensual tradeoff made by the political community for the sake of good governance or faster development. Given the resources and the confidence, peoples in such states would almost certainly put more pressure on their rulers to improve the provision of liberal rights. In this sense, the Rawlsian attention to mutual respect and encouragement among peoples despite their differences was surely apposite.

How often such a tradeoff actually exists (objectively or subjectively) is another matter, and it may be that as a matter of practice, it rarely makes sense to citizens to allow such curtailments (Sen 1999; United Nations Development Programme 2000; Halperin et al. 2005). As such, it may be appropriate for a normative theory to continue to insist on the superordinate status of liberal rights. But the justification in this case would rest on a critical empirical assumption, namely that they underpin good governance and strong development, or that without such status they themselves become impossible to attain as a matter of practice. Alternatively, a normative theory could insist that any definition of good governance must include the fairness of the policy process through which such tradeoffs are decided. On that definition, many regimes that impose tradeoffs on their citizens without any evidence of consent fail the most basic standard of good governance.

Provided there was sufficient evidence of consent or fairness in the making of tradeoffs, the failure to realize liberal rights could not be taken as a sign of illegitimacy, only of the developmental stage and political evolution of a country. As both Reidy and Macedo have argued, the moral value of self-government, the need to respect the evolutionary choices made by a political community within certain bounds, demands that a standard of legitimacy allows leeway for such cases, which I call 'laggards' (Macedo 2004; Reidy 2006). After all, every liberal democracy today was a laggard at some point, and none would wish to have been denied the ability to escape that condition on their own. As Reidy adds: 'How can liberal democratic peoples ground their *amour propre* in their own liberal democratic orders taken as their own achievements and at the same time affirm principles of international morality that permit the use of force to compel the liberalization and democratization of other nonaggressive states [that are otherwise decent]?' (Reidy 2006: 180)

Uncertainties and Implications

Several statistical⁵ and normative⁶ uncertainties exist about the universal theory above. One should therefore ask whether it is simply too dangerous to proceed 'as if' we know what a globally-valid theory of legitimacy should look like.

The question can only be answered in the context of the moral costs of *not* doing so. At present, powerful Western governments and scholars base their legitimacy evaluations on a competing number of theories. Two of the most prominent of these are one that attaches superordinate importance to liberal rights and one that denies the universality of liberal rights. Neither of these, it has been argued, is the most valid account we can give. As such, undue pressure is often brought to bear on countries for failing to realize liberal rights despite their governance and development records – Egypt and Uganda are good examples. Conversely, others are prepared to tolerate states that fail on all dimensions, in line with the ‘thin’ view: Zimbabwe, pre-Rose Revolution Georgia, and military-ruled Pakistan are good examples. We may have doubts about the universal theory here, but it is more grounded in evidence than the ones currently in favor. We should not be flexible about attempts to water down the content of rights, but we should be tolerant of modifications of their status vis-à-vis other morally-valued goods where states are genuinely pursuing them, and that choice has been endorsed by their citizens.

The ‘thick versus thin’ argument is thus misplaced. In favor of the ‘thick’ advocates, we have found that by and large global citizens do value liberal rights as fundamental requirements of state legitimacy. In favor of the ‘thin’ advocates, we have found that these rights do not enjoy a trump status over other morally valued goals, in particular development and good governance.

Thus, the best way to describe a globally valid theory of legitimacy is that it is ‘partial and plural’. It has only a partial explanatory power over the legitimacy of states, and the content of that explanation is more plural than the question of liberal rights. The liberal rights in such a theory are certainly more thick than thin. But they also exist alongside other valued moral goods.

Rawls was thus doubly mistaken, first in diluting the content of liberal rights, and second in ignoring the possibility that other goals might be both subjectively universal and normatively defensible.

However, he was absolutely right in his recognition of the need to consider a wider range of acceptable outcomes, to extend the liberal principle of toleration to the question of political philosophy itself, and to put a high premium on the notion of mutual respect in the international community of nations.

Notes

1. Given the high level of inter-relatedness between many plausible variables, as well as the probably weak but nonetheless significant inverse causality from legitimacy to those variables, simple correlations offer the best starting point for such an investigation. In order to meet the demanding assumptions of multivariate analysis, one would need to develop instrumental variables to cope with endogeneity, or else develop longitudinal data to ensure temporal ordering.
2. I define the bottom two categories of the seven-point scale (defined as ‘unlimited authority’ or an intermediate category above it) as failing the decent consultation hierarchy test. Above that, there are ‘slight to moderate limitations on executive authority’ and the decent consultation hierarchy test is met.
3. ‘Uzbekistan: Lifting the siege on the truth about Andizhan: Summary’, Amnesty International, 20 September 2005. The official death toll was 187.

4. Using either multiple regression or a combined variable of governance, development, and liberal rights gives a squared correlation coefficient (r^2) of approximately 0.53, meaning that universalistic sources can explain roughly half of legitimacy variations across the 72 states.
5. One obviously concerns the conceptualization and measurement of legitimacy and of the three main variables themselves. In addition, while micro-level evidence can be cited in support of the view that these correlations reflect causal relationships, an outstanding question is whether the linear model is the best approximation of the strength of those relationships. In addition, the large amount of 'noise' that characterizes any explanation of legitimacy outside of the more predictable West raises the question of how accurate this picture is in most countries and whether it would change across time.
6. An obvious list of uncertainties about the moral reasoning behind this theory of legitimacy would include: whether individuals or peoples are the appropriate subjects; the definition of procedural fairness through which tradeoffs are decided; whether liberal rights properly defined would include good governance itself; and the role of international society in second-guessing domestic legitimacy evaluations.

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