

SOCIO-POLITICAL LEGITIMACY: AN INTEGRATIVE AND INTERDISCIPLINARY REVIEW AND AGENDA FOR THEORY DEVELOPMENT IN UNIT AND PROGRAMMATIC APPROACHES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Firms operating across national borders are subject to scrutiny in both home and host countries. These multiple regimes of scrutiny increase their vulnerability to legitimacy crises that can significantly impact their operations and reputations. Over the past two decades, scholars in international business (IB) have investigated socio-political legitimacy (SPL), primarily through an institutionalist lens. However, despite extensive research across IB, political science, and sociology, the literature remains fragmented, characterized by diverse theoretical frameworks and modes of inquiry. This paper seeks to synthesize these disparate perspectives and identify converging themes. Specifically, it examines legitimacy through three core dimensions: property, perception, and process. Drawing on 250 studies from IB and management, sociology, and political science journals, this integrative review offers a comprehensive understanding of SPL, highlighting key theories, themes, and methodological trends. Furthermore, it introduces a “theory-on-theory” agenda aimed at advancing legitimacy both as a unit theory and in its relative role within institutional theory as a programmatic theory. The paper lays the foundations for future theorizing and empirical research on legitimacy-building strategies across diverse institutional contexts.



KEYWORDS

- Sociology
- Legitimacy
- Socio-political legitimacy
- MNEs
- Institutional theory
- Unit theory
- Programmatic theory
- Political science



RESEARCH RELEVANCE

- By synthesising 250 studies across international business, political science, and sociology, the article integrates diverse conceptualisations of socio-political legitimacy (SPL) and identifies convergence around three core dimensions—property, perception, and process.
- The article advances a “theory-on-theory” agenda, clarifying how legitimacy can function both as a unit theory (a firm-level resource and strategic concern) and as a component of programmatic theory, particularly within institutional theory.
- Highlighting the multi-level nature of legitimacy: Findings show that SPL operates across micro, meso, and macro levels—shaped by firm strategies, societal perceptions, and institutional norms—necessitating more integrative approaches to theorising legitimacy-building in MNEs.
- The article documents significant disciplinary fragmentation, varied methodologies, and limited cross-field dialogue, emphasising the need for interdisciplinary synthesis to advance conceptual clarity and cumulative theorising.
- By mapping theoretical strands and proposing avenues for integrating SPL into broader institutional frameworks, the article establishes a platform for studying how firms construct, contest, and maintain legitimacy across diverse institutional environments.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

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“Socio-political legitimacy is not merely a firm-level asset but a multi-level, institutionally embedded phenomenon whose conceptual cohesion depends on bridging disciplinary divides”

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