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Unpacking reputational power: Intended and unintended determinants of the assessment of actors' power

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ABSTRACT

The idea behind the reputational measure for assessing power of political actors is that actors involved in a decision-making process have the best view of their fellows' power. There has been, however, no systematic examination of why actors consider other actors as powerful. Consequently, it is unclear whether reputational power measures what it ought to. The paper analyzes the determinants of power attribution and distinguishes intended from unintended determinants in a data-set of power assessment covering 10 political decision-making processes in Switzerland. Results are overall reassuring, but nevertheless point toward self-promotion or misperception biases, as informants systematically attribute more power to actors with whom they collaborate.

1. Introduction

The reputational measure for assessing power of political actors has been used for decades in studies on public policy, policy networks and political decision-making (e.g. Fernandez and Gould, 1994; Fischer et al., 2009; Henry, 2011; Ingold, 2011; Knoke et al., 1996; Kriesi et al., 2006; Matti and Sandström, 2011; Sciarini et al., 2004). The basic underlying idea of reputational power is that actors belonging to a given political system or involved in a specific decision-making process have the most accurate view of how power is allocated among actors. Reputational power is most often used in its aggregated form: The score of reputational power of a given actor is computed as the sum (or the mean) of power attributions granted to this actor.

By so doing, one fails to recognize that power assessment is relational in nature and should be analyzed accordingly, that is, through a network perspective. In addition, reputational power is also inherently subjective, as it is based on the mutual evaluation of power among political actors. Therefore, when asking a political actor about the power of its fellows, one does not know on which criteria the informant's assessment is based. An informant may consider another actor as powerful for several – good – reasons: Because the latter has formal authority, because it has access to several institutional arenas of decision-making, because it has lots of allies, or because of its agenda-setting power. These elements capture parts of what the reputational measure is supposed to capture. However, an informant may also consider another actor as powerful for less good reasons, which would affect the assessment of reputational power. Thus, actors should not systematically attribute more power to each other simply because they share some similarity or because they collaborate.

We suggest that such unintended determinants of power attribution may be the result of either deliberate self-promotion (Pfeffer et al., 2006; Tal-Or, 2010) or a perception bias (Kitts, 2003; Leach and Sabatier, 2005). On the one hand, informants may intentionally overstate the power of fellows with whom they share some similarities or with whom they closely collaborate, in order to indirectly promote themselves. On the other hand, informants may suffer from a perception bias, that is, they may truly believe that similar or close fellows are more powerful than they are in reality. Either way, this affects the construct validity (Cronbach and Meehl, 1955) of the reputational power measure, which does no longer measure what it ought to.

In other words, one should be aware that reputational power is likely to capture both intended and less intended factors. To our knowledge, the question regarding whether and to what extent reputational power measures what it ought to measure has been hardly addressed thus far. It is, however, of utmost importance. First, given that reputational power is so extensively used in empirical studies, it is crucial to know more about the underlying determinants and the possible weaknesses of the measure. Second, identifying the unintended determinants will be of great help for researchers that are planning to use this measure, as it can give

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important hints on how to design a survey and on how to overcome – or to control for – these unintended factors.

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to identify the determinants of reputational power attribution. More specifically, we wish to analyze whether reputational power measures what it intends to measure. To that end, we apply Exponential Random Graph Models (ERGM) to a unique network data-set covering the 10 most important decision-making processes of the early 2000s in Switzerland. Nodes of the networks are collective political actors such as administrative agencies, interest groups, political parties, or cantons. Data stem from approximately 230 face-to-face interviews conducted with representatives of these collective actors. The data-set offers systematic information regarding both the network of reputational power assessment as well as the likely determinants – attribute-related and relation-related – of power attribution for each of the 10 decision-making processes under study. It thus enables us to identify the sources of reputational power assessment across a range of policy processes, which obviously increases the confidence in our findings. In addition, it also allows us to evaluate whether collaboration in other decision-making processes as a specific form of "multiplexity" is likely to bias power assessment in the process of interest.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Our analytical framework appears in Section 2. We develop our theoretical argument regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the measure of reputational power. From that we derive our hypotheses regarding the unintended determinants of the measure. Section 3 presents the data, the method, and the models. Results appear in Section 4, Section 5 concludes.

2. Analytical framework

Power is one of the most fundamental but also most controversial concepts in political science. Consequently, it has been defined and measured in a myriad of different ways (e.g. Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Bates, 2010; Dahl, 1957, 1961; Emerson, 1962; Lukes, 1974; Scott, 1994). According to Max Weber's famous definition "power means every opportunity, within a social relationship, to enforce one's own preference despite resistance." (Weber (1980) cited in Weiss, 1996). This definition fits well to a policy-making perspective: On the one hand, power means exerting influence on other actors; on the other hand, it means influencing policy decisions (see Knoke et al., 1996).

2.1. Assessing reputational power: theoretical and methodological considerations

In political science and political sociology the use of the reputational measure to evaluate the power of political actors has a long tradition. Originating in the US community power literature in the 1960s (e.g. Dahl, 1961; Emerson, 1962; Gamson, 1966; Laumann and Knoke, 1987; Laumann and Pappi, 1976), the measure of reputational power has also been extensively used in policy analysis, this in a variety of countries and policy domains (e.g. Fernandez and Gould, 1994; Fischer et al., 2009; Henry, 2011; Ingold, 2011; Knoke et al., 1996; Kriesi et al., 2006; Matti and Sandström, 2011; Sciarini et al., 2004). For instance, Knoke et al. (1996) compare networks of labor market policy in different countries and assess the relative power of the state and interest groups. Sciarini et al. (2004) compare Europeanized and domestic decision-making processes in Switzerland and, based on the reputational method, find that state actors are more powerful in the former than in the latter. Henry (2011) uses the measure in order to analyze whether the perceived influence of an actor makes this actor more attractive as a cooperation partner for others. Besides political science, other research domains rely on the concept of reputation. For example, the domains of organization and management studies rely on the concept of corporate reputation in order to measure the public image or identity of a firm and its attractiveness to investors, clients or employees (e.g. Barnett and Pollock, 2012; Ponzi et al., 2011; Walker, 2010; Walsh and Beatty, 2007).[1]

To gather reputational data, researchers typically rely on face-to-face interviews and postal or online questionnaires. They ask collective actors – or, more specifically, representatives of collective actors – to name those actors that, in their view, are very influential in a specific political system or a given decision-making process.[2] This data gathering results in a binary matrix with the same set of actors on both dimensions.[3] On the horizontal dimension, actors are "active" as informants about their fellows' power. In the terminology of network analysis, they are "egos" or "senders" of ties, in that case of reputation attribution. On the vertical dimension, the same actors are "passively" evaluated by their fellows, that is, they are "alters" or "receivers" of power attribution. The reputational power of each actor is then derived from the data: The score of reputational power of each actor corresponds to the sum (or the mean) of power judgments that this actor receives.[4] The resulting reputational power indicator is then mostly used in its aggregated form. Corporate reputation is measured in the same way, i.e. by assessing stakeholders' perceptions and calculating the aggregated perception of all stakeholders (Walker, 2010).

Critical discussions of the measure of reputational power are as old as its applications. The measure has two main strengths. First, reputational power is supposed to be close to reality, because it relies on judgments of actors that are directly involved in the political system or decision-making process, and are therefore best positioned to evaluate their fellows' power.[5] Second, the reputational measure is supposed to provide an encompassing view of power, no matter where power comes from. The fact that the measure is based on the evaluation of actors that directly participate in a decision-making process helps to uncover parts of the "hidden" face of power (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). That is, it helps to take into account elements of power that are hardly measurable otherwise, like actors' agenda-setting power, their ability to avoid the public discussion of certain issues, or their influence due to financial resources.[6] In other words, the measure can account for elements that are hardly visible to an outside observer.

The encompassing nature of reputational power is however not only an asset, but also a weakness. It is argued that the measure is problematic because it is difficult to make sure that the researcher and the informants share the same definition of power (Knoke, 1998; Wolfinger, 1960). Given this, there is a risk that the researcher relies on data from informants who are not aware of the different

[1] However, the scope of measuring corporate reputation is somehow different from the scope of measuring reputational power in political studies. While the latter is meant to be a measure that approximates the theoretical concept of political power, the former is a concept on its own that represents a resource to a firm and a competitive advantage on the market.

[2] In line with the definition of power mentioned above, for the purpose of this paper we use "influential" as a synonym of "powerful", and "influence" as a synonym of "power".

[3] Researchers sometimes additionally ask interview partners to indicate powerful actors not present on the pre-defined list. This is important for reasons of completeness, but obviously distorts the symmetry between informants and actors.

[4] These sums are identical to the in-degree centrality in a network of reputation assessment (Knoke, 1998).

[5] In addition, even if reputational power is inherently subjective, the simple fact that an ego believes that its alter is powerful will have important implications. That is, it will lead ego to behave as if alter was powerful, which in the end will render alter powerful anyway (ŝelf-fulfilling prophecy).

[6] In the Swiss context, it also helps to take into account the "referendum power" of an actor, that is, the fact that an actor can credibly threaten to attack and invalidate a decision by referendum (Fischer, 2005).