Citizens' view of legitimacy in the context of Finnish forest policy

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ABSTRACT

The goal of forest policy is to enhance sustainable production of the material and immaterial benefits of forests to serve the needs of all citizens. A theoretical model for explaining the formation of legitimacy in a certain political sector was developed and empirically tested in the context of Finnish forest policy. Nationwide mail survey data was used to determine the differences in the perceptions of forest policy by Finnish forest owners and other citizens. The questionnaire measured the *legitimacy* of the forest policy, *the acceptance of laws*, *the justice of the procedures*, *the fairness of power relations*, *the acceptance of forestry operations* and *the competence in forest policy issues*. Overall legitimacy was evaluated positively, and the forest owners considered forest policy in general to be more acceptable than other citizens did. The most criticized aspects of forest policy were the justice of the procedures and the use of clearcutting. Procedural justice and acceptance of forestry operations were the strongest explanatory factors for the legitimacy. Acceptance of the power relations of different stakeholder groups explained legitimacy for non-owners but not for forest owners. In both groups, forest policy competence led to a more negative evaluation of legitimacy.

1. Introduction

In an ongoing shift from representative democracy to participatory democracy (e.g. Gaventa, 2004, 25–28), there are high expectations for new modes of governance, where the state has coordinative function in co-production of collective goods through actor networks (Hogl et al., 2012, 8–9). In these new modes of governance, there is an inherent emphasis on participation in policy making. In current day changes in governance, a question of the legitimacy of politics comes up. Generally speaking, when citizens perceive the state's policies as legitimate, they accept the exercise of power, and, hence, the implementation of decisions becomes easier. In addition, the degree and quality of private and public actors' cooperation improve (Tyler, 2006). However, it is normal in contemporary pluralistic societies to find diverging opinions and discussion of public policies. In the best cases, discussion leads to changes in the system so that the system can better serve its members.

There are a number of empirical studies in legitimacy that focus on the legitimacy of the state in general (e.g., Gilley, 2006; Lillbacka, 1999; Weatherford, 1992). There are also studies of legitimacy of well-defined institutions, such as the legitimacy of policing (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003), as well as of the legitimacy of certain decisions, such as legalization of physician-assisted suicide (Skitka et al., 2009). There is a big leap in the level of abstraction from the legitimacy of specific institutions, e.g. how well the police manage their duties, to state legitimacy, which is based on less concrete feelings towards nation states. Studies of the legitimacy of a certain political sector, which are somewhere between the two aforementioned study lines, are often qualitative. For that reason, such studies can identify problematic features of policies, but generalizing the results to the level of the whole population is not feasible.

The legitimacy of a certain political sector is also a step from a general, state-level legitimacy to more concrete issues in which laymen are more likely to have something to say. Most citizens at least have preferences as to political outcomes. Many also have strong views on how they want conflicting goals to be managed and who is, or which institutions are, entitled to manage these issues appropriately.

The legitimacy of forest and nature conservation policy has emerged as a crucial question in the conflicting interests between the intensive use of forests and biodiversity conservation. Lately, the well-being of humans and of the communities to which forests contribute has also emerged as a key issue (e.g., Kelly and Bliss, 2009). In Finland, the legitimacy of the forest policy has recently been questioned by forest owners (Siiskonen, 2007), the Samí reindeer herders (Raitio, 2008), and environmentalists (Donner-Amnell and Rytteri, 2010; Raitio, 2008).

Finnish forest policy serves as an opportune area in which to study the legitimacy of a single political sector for at least three reasons. First, forest policy is a well-defined policy sector, which is not divided into numerous fields or sub-sectors, as are social policy or economic policy, for example. Second, there are qualitative studies (e.g. Rantala and Primmer, 2003) in the field from which it is possible to develop a questionnaire. Third, the current study has international implications as

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well as national ones since Finland has taken an active role in the preparation and implementation of international forest policy (Ministry of agriculture and forestry, 2011).

In the case of Finnish forest policy, there is a certain group, namely family forest owners, whose viewpoints probably differ from the rest of the population (Karppinen and Hänninen, 2000; Vanhanen et al., 2010). Forest policy affects the landscape and the contribution of the forest to the national economy; for forest owners, policy also regulates the use of their property.

The aim of this article is to create a theoretical model of legitimacy and test it empirically in the context of forest policy using survey data on Finnish citizens. The study reveals the aspects of Finnish forest policy that are most criticized and points out the generally agreed upon elements. Furthermore, it compares the two sides of the story: forest owners and other citizens.

1.1. Forest policy in Finland

Finland is the most densely forested country in Europe. It has more than 70% forest cover, and 90% of the forests are in commercial use (Finnish Statistical Yearbook of Forestry, 2011). Thus, forest management significantly shapes the forest scenery, and, along with that, citizens' perceptions of nature. For example, Finnish forest stands today are more or less evenly aged and consist mostly of one tree species. This is in contrast to the natural forests, which have various tree species and a wide age distribution.

The Forest Act and Nature Conservation Act control the use of forests. The purpose of the Forest Act (1093/1996) is to promote economically, ecologically and socially sustainable management and utilization of forests in a manner that the forests produce wood in a sustainable way that preserves their biological diversity. The aim of the Nature Conservation Act (1096/1996) is to: 1) maintain biological diversity; 2) conserve nature's beauty and scenic value; 3) promote the sustainable use of natural resources and the natural environment; 4) promote awareness and general interest in nature; and 5) promote scientific research.

The goal of Finland's forest policy is to enhance the sustainable production of the material and immaterial benefits of the forests to serve the needs of all citizens (Kuuluvainen and Valsta, 2009; see also Ministry of agriculture and forestry, 2011). Consequently, a successful forest policy should acknowledge various perspectives.

One perspective in the sector is that of non-industrial private forest owners. Almost 15% of Finns are forest owners (Finnish Statistical Yearbook of Forestry, 2011). Forest laws and regulations outline the rights of forest owners to use their property. Nevertheless, people who do not own forest still have Everyman's Right to pick berries and to camp in any forest, regardless of who owns it (Everyman's rights in Finland, 2007). The Everyman's Right allows free right of access, meaning that access is free of charge and does not require the landowner's permission, to the land and waterways and the right to collect natural products such as wild berries and mushrooms. People using these rights are obliged not to cause any damage or disturbance to nature. Such rights are widely applied in the Nordic European Countries, and they also apply to foreign citizens. The only exceptions are related to local boating, fishing and hunting rights. Because governing the property use, ownership probably has an effect on how people see forest regulation, the goals of forest policy, and the legitimacy of the forest policy as whole.

There is a history of rather intense conflicts over the forests in Finland (Hellström, 2001). Therefore, to understand the context, it is necessary to discuss briefly certain groups that are essential in Finnish forest policy. One specific group located in Northern Finland is Samí reindeer herders. Their traditional rights of access for reindeer grazing, through which they make their living, conflict with forestry practices. The conflict has escalated to the extent that the issue of native peoples' rights to practice their traditional livelihood is being processed by the Human Rights Tribunal (see thorough discussion of the issue in Raitio,

2008). Another group is environmentalists, who have intensively challenged the traditional forestry practices and procedures in last decades. Actually, the debate on forest policy in Finland has shown to be polarized around a forestry position, characterized by utilization of natural resources, and nature position, which emphasizes the intrinsic value of forest nature (Rantala and Primmer, 2003).

The way to reconcile the varying viewpoints is through the National Forest Programme (NFP), which has been created as an open and participatory process between the stakeholders in forest issues (Finlands' National Forest Programme 2015, 2010). Nevertheless, Primmer and Kyllönen (2006) concluded in their analysis of preparation of previous Finnish National Forest Programme that public participation did not succeed in creating genuine possibilities for different groups to provide new input into the process. Regardless of the salience of citizens' needs in the goal-setting of forest policy, research on the legitimacy of forest policy from the public's point of view is non-existent. Furthermore, studies comparing forest owners' and other citizens' attitudes towards forests and their uses are lacking.

1.2. Legitimacy of policy and its predictors

In the 1920s, Max Weber introduced the concept of legitimacy and used it to refer to citizens' acceptance of the use of power (Weber, 1978). Hence, this way of thinking has come to define legitimacy as the property of a system. In social psychological studies, on the other hand, legitimacy is considered a belief in the appropriateness of authorities and institutions (Tyler, 2006); it emphasizes citizens' perceptions of an issue. In the present study, the definition of legitimacy is adopted from Tyler (2006) as "the *belief* that authorities, institutions, and social arrangements are appropriate, proper, and just." It is a property that leads people to defer voluntarily to decisions, rules, and social arrangements (Tyler, 2006). Legitimacy is also seen to be close to satisfaction with the system and reliance on the system.

To study the legitimacy of a certain political sector, it helps to have an understanding of political support in general to clarify the focus. Norris (1999, redefined 2011) has elaborated Easton's (1965) classical framework of political support. The following list of five distinct components of support can be seen as a continuum from the most general (or diffuse) to the most specific: 1) belonging to the nation-state, 2) agreement with core principles and normative values upon which the regime is based, e.g., democratic ideals, 3) evaluations of the overall performance of the regime, 4) confidence in regime institutions, and 5) approval of incumbent office-holders (Norris, 2011).

Since the focus in this study is on a specific field of policy (not on the state's legitimacy), Norris' model needs some clarification to be applicable to the context. Norris' continuum from diffuse to specific allows us to define the appropriate cut point in specificity most relevant to this topic. Belonging to a nation-state and agreement with core principles refer to state's properties, but the components from the third point onwards on are appropriate in the context of forest policy.

Norris (2011) describes the evaluation of the overall performance of the regime (in 3) as general satisfaction and as an assessment of processes and practices. For our purposes, it is better to consider the processes and practices separately. This is because the practices can be seen as end products or outcomes of the processes. Furthermore, the processes may also be acceptable in cases when the outcomes are not considered favorable from an individual perspective (Hegtvedt et al., 2003).

For confidence in regime institutions (4), the legislative and judicial aspects are relevant (Norris, 2011). In the case of a specific field of policy, legislation and specific laws define the field's boundaries and goals.

Approval of officials (5) refers to attitudes towards a wide variety of key players, ranging from legislators to party leaders and leadership elites (Norris, 2011). The leaders in particular sector of politics are often not familiar to citizens. However, most people have an opinion on the stakeholder groups who are involved in the policymaking process, as well as on the groups who are the objects of the policy.