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THE DISCURSIVE LEGITIMATION
OF POLITICAL REGIMES:
A NETWORK PERSPECTIVE

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The Discursive Legitimation of Political Regimes:
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ABSTRACT

In this working paper, we treat legitimacy and legitimation as interactive, discursive and relational concepts: Legitimacy is socially constructed in the public spheres of (democratic) political regimes, that is, in discursive exchanges of political elites and citizens about the acceptability of these regimes. Legitimacy claims and assessments establish a link between regimes and their institutions on the one hand, and normative benchmarks on the other. Hence they may be examined with the help of discourse network analysis – a novel application of network analysis whose rationale and potential are illustrated on the basis of a corpus of legitimation statements gleaned from German and US quality newspapers. Our method enables us to discover and visualize the structures of legitimation discourses – prominent speaker types, privileged legitimation criteria and discourse coalitions – and to offer some conjectures on the link between discourses and the institutional arrangements of the German and US polities.

CONTENTS

The Discursive Legitimation of Political Regimes: A Network Perspective

INTRODUCTION

Legitimacy is a core issue of political science (Beetham 1991: 7), yet the study of legitimation processes and practices remains widely neglected. As a consequence, the social construction of legitimacy is still not well understood. Legitimacy as an empirical phenomenon is (re-)produced, contested, and transformed in social interactions of political elites and citizens. These interactions are mostly in the form of public communication (Luckmann 1987: 11; Barker 2001; Raufer 2005). Legitimacy-related public communication is, in turn, embedded in varying political cultures and institutional settings that create opportunities and constraints for speakers and their propositions (Schmidt 2008). A focus on the structures and dynamics of legitimation discourses is therefore required to tap into legitimation processes (Schmidtke and Schneider 2012).

Legitimacy is a relational concept. It is not an attribute of a political system and its institutions, but rather a *relationship* between this system and citizens who consider it legitimate or not. Our paper therefore employs a genuinely relational methodology to study legitimation. We focus on the structures of legitimation discourses related to national political regimes and introduce a method – discourse network analysis – that enables us to shed light on the actor constellations and repertoires of justifications encountered in this type of public communication. Who participates in it? Which claims and assessments are put forward – and which justifications for them are given – by different speakers? Which discourse coalitions exist? The empirical analysis relies on a text corpus reflecting legitimation discourses in the quality press of Germany and the United States.[1] In the following section, we outline our rationale for a discourse perspective on legitimation and then present the method of discourse network analysis. In the main section, we examine the structures and actor constellations of German and American legitimation discourses over a ten-year period (1998-2007). The analysis reveals characteristic discourse coalitions and framings of the legitimacy issue in both national institutional settings. As the incumbents of political authority roles are prominent voices in both cases, our findings also enable us to offer some tentative conjectures about the

relationship between legitimation discourses and nationally specific institutional arrangements.

LEGITIMATION DISCOURSES AND NETWORK ANALYSIS

Legitimacy is used as an empirical concept here. A political regime is legitimate if it enjoys a modicum of diffuse support (Easton 1965, 1975), thus relying on voluntary, explicit and normatively grounded consent in addition to mere acquiescence, the fear of sanctions, or self-interest (Weber 1968: para. 5; Hurd 1999: 383–9). Legitimacy in this empirical sense may not be viewed as a quasi-objective attribute of a regime and its institutions. Rather, social and discursive interactions of political elites and citizens underpin legitimation processes. As Weber and Luckmann (1987: 111) remind us, political elites have a vested interest in the mobilization of support and the (re-)production of legitimacy beliefs, and hence may be expected to put forward (self-)legitimating claims – justifications of their political authority – on an ongoing basis. The kind of normatively grounded regime support that we call legitimacy obtains – and its foundations are successfully reproduced – where such claims are submitted to the court of public opinion, evaluated and widely accepted by citizens.

In short, while the nature of legitimation processes is essentially discursive, we should expect them to unfold in the public spheres of (democratic) political systems (Peters 2007). These legitimation discourses may occur in different arenas, in the private conversations of laypersons as well as in parliamentary or scholarly debates. In our own empirical work, we concentrate on the media and, more specifically, the quality press. The media play a key role in the constitution of public spheres. As for opinion-leading newspapers, they arguably continue to play an important role in the documentation and framing of public debates in modern societies. The media at large and newspapers, then, have a watchdog function and serve as gatekeepers between the political system and citizens at large (Habermas 1974; Wessler et al. 2008; Gerhards and Schäfer 2010). In the legitimation context, they play a double role – on the one hand, as a crucial *platform* for the legitimacy claims and assessments of political elites and civil society, and on the other, as key *participants* in legitimacy-related discourses. It goes without saying that the analysis of legitimation debates reflected in, or highlighted by, the quality press will reveal characteristic biases of that discursive arena. Journalists contribute legitimacy evaluations or select and cite *other* people's assessments according to their own criteria of appropriateness and relevance. While discourses in the quality press are therefore unlikely to be "representative" of public communication at large, their biases matter precisely because of the key role of the media in the (re-)production of legitimacy and because some types of speakers or assessments are likely to be given more voice or "traction" than others.

But how may legitimation discourses be identified and examined? We argue that a proposition in which some kind of actor (speaker) evaluates a political system as a whole, its elites, or some of its institutions as legitimate or illegitimate, giving reasons (justifications) for her assessment, may be viewed as the core practice of legitimation. Such *legitimation statements* may be (self-)legitimating claims put forward by political elites or assessments formulated by journalists, "simple" citizens, interest-group representatives, and other members of a political community. They may be described with the help of a stylized *legitimation grammar* that takes its inspiration from the S(ubject)-A(ction)-O(bject) scheme and its extensions used in claims analysis (Koopmans and Statham 1999; Franzosi 2004; Adam 2008). Four key variables define these statements – the precise *object* that is assessed, the legitimating (positive) or delegitimating (negative) *thrust* of the evaluation, the normative *criterion* on which it is based, and the *speaker* (Table 1).[2]

Table 1: Legitimation grammar and examples

Example 1: Tim B. Müller (journalist) says: "Deutschland schläft. Seine Politiker erstarren in zynischer Einfallslosigkeit" (SZ, 4 December 2002).	The German political system and its elites are…	illegitimate…	because…	they lack innovative capacity.
Example 2: Massachusetts House Speaker Thomas M. Finneran says: "The people and their representatives have been sent to the sidelines by the courts, and that's not right" (*Washington Post*, 6 February 2004).	The US judiciary is…	illegitimate…	because…	it undermines popular sovereignty.

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[2] Statements that evaluate the specific *incumbents* of political authority roles (Easton's authorities) were excluded from the data set; all propositions thus assess the German or American political system or community as a whole, regime principles (e.g., democracy or the rule of law), specific core institutions (e.g., the *Bundestag* or the Presidency), or key actor groups (such as the political class or the party system). While this distinction turns out to be highly relevant (for instance, general assessments of the political system are more likely to be affirmative than evaluations of actor groups; see Table 3 in the appendix), it will be ignored here in order to highlight the link between speaker types participating in legitimation discourses and reasons given for their assessments. Hence we do not necessarily claim that statements evaluating these different various reference objects have the same *weight*. Yet they all represent evaluations of regime elements and should therefore also be taken seriously as elements of legitimation discourses.

These statements may of course be examined with the help of traditional content-analytical and statistical procedures (as in our own previous work, see, for instance, Hurrelmann et al. 2009). Such an approach, however, risks to obfuscate the *relational* nature of the data gleaned from legitimacy-related propositions with the help of our grammar. Each statement connects speakers with legitimation criteria and objects to evaluate the latter positively or negatively. The participants of legitimation discourses and the reasons offered by them for their (de-)legitimating evaluations of political systems and institutions may therefore be conceptualized as networks, and our data may be visualized and interpreted with the help of the novel method of *discourse network analysis* (Leifeld 2009; Leifeld and Haunss 2012). In contrast with standard applications of network analysis in the social sciences (McClurg and Young 2011), the method is used here to represent discursive rather than social relationships. These *discourse networks* link speakers with legitimation criteria. On the basis of a coded set of legitimation statements, an affiliation network G^{aff} connecting actors a_1, a_2, ... a_m (in our case, speakers) with concepts c_1, c_2, ... c_n (in our case, legitimation criteria) may be created, as indicated by the solid lines in Figure 1. These lines are *directed* (arcs) because actors select concepts, not the other way around.

Figure 1: Basic discourse network model
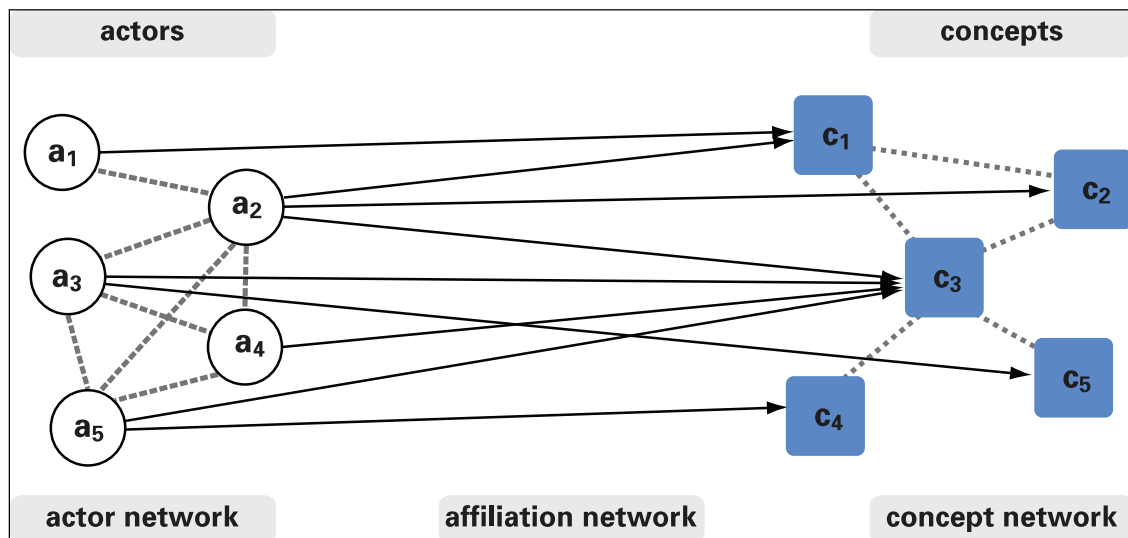
Source: Janning et al. 2009: 71

Moreover, since an actor uses a concept at a specific time *t*, for each point in time an affiliation network G_t^{aff} exists. Finally, actors may draw on any legitimation criterion to either legitimate or delegitimate a regime or one of its elements. Actor a_1 could, for instance, argue that her government is illegitimate because it disrespects popular sovereignty while actor a_2 claims precisely the opposite, thus affirming that the government respects popular sovereignty and therefore has to be viewed as legitimate. A negative or positive sign attached to the value of the arc connecting actor and concept indicates this

piece of information in the network model. Such a discourse network is a *directed temporal signed 2-mode network*. Two derivative 1-mode networks linked to this original network may be generated by connecting actors that share a concept or concepts used by the same actors. These *co-occurrence networks* are undirected; they are visualized by the dotted lines in Figure 1.[3]

LEGITIMATION DISCOURSE NETWORKS IN GERMANY AND THE UNITED STATES

Articles from two quality newspapers per country (Germany: *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*; United States: *Washington Post* and *New York Times*), published between 1998 and 2007 in twelve-day time windows around the Chancellor's annual Government Declaration on the budget and the President's State of the Union Address, and containing one or more legitimation statements were included in our text corpus; the individual propositions were coded using our legitimation grammar. This procedure yielded a text corpus of 798 newspaper articles (DE: 308, US: 490) and a data set of 1,985 legitimation statements (DE: 752; US: 1,233). The propositions in the data set may be assessments made by journalists themselves, (direct) citations, or legitimation statements attributed to various other speaker types, notably including the representatives of political institutions and members of civil society (see also Table 2 in the appendix).

We begin our analysis with a quick glance at the full discourse networks for Germany and the United States, including all speaker types and legitimation criteria that occurred in the two public spheres (Figure 2). These otherwise rather unwieldy diagrams will also be used to provide some additional information on the technicalities of network graphs and our coding scheme. Speakers are represented by white circles and legitimation criteria by blue squares in each of these graphs. The color of the arcs indicates whether an actor uses the connected concept to legitimate (green) or to delegitimate (orange) an element of her political order. The size of the nodes represents the relative number of statements made by an actor and the width of the arcs indicates how often the respective actor has used the connected legitimation criterion. The relative

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[3] By accounting for negative or positive arc values, six more specific actor and concept networks may be generated: a positive and a negative *congruence network* connecting actors that use the same concepts in the same way and a *conflict network* in which edges are formed if two actors disagree on a concept; and conversely, two congruence networks of concepts connected through like-minded actors and a conflict network of concepts connected through disagreeing actors. Again, these derivative networks may be generated for each point in time *t*, enabling an analysis of network evolution. For this article, however, we only use the original 2-mode network and the derived congruence networks.

centrality of an actor or a concept (that is, the frequency of their appearance or use in our material) determines the position in the graph, with the most central actors and concepts in the center and the less central ones in the periphery.

The complex networks depicted in Figure 2 illustrate a number of points: First, a broad range of individual and collective actors participate in mediated public debates on the legitimacy of the German and US political systems with their regime principles, core institutions, and major actor groups. There is, in other words, genuine discursive interaction that notably includes different voices from civil society and political elites. As expected, in both countries, the journalists of opinion-leading papers themselves are key participants in these discourses; in Germany, they play an even more prominent role than in the US, contributing almost 40 per cent as opposed to 21 per cent of all legitimation statements. While speakers associated with civil society contributed roughly a quarter of all statements in both cases, the role of political actors as contributors to legitimation discourses is more prominent in the United States than in Germany (52 v. 37 per cent; Table 3 in the appendix). Turning to the finer-grained typology of speakers used in the graphs, it is readily apparent that a small number of core actors besides journalists dominate the legitimation discourses in each of the two cases.[4] Interestingly, this distribution of speaker types is not what one might have expected in light of hypotheses gleaned from the literature on varying *media cultures*. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), corporatist media systems are characterized by a relatively strong partisan orientation and rather close links between journalists and political elites while the media are more independent in liberal systems. Thus speakers associated with the regime and their legitimacy claims should have been more prominent in the corporatist media system of Germany than in the liberal system of the United States.

A small number of criteria are privileged. Interestingly, "unspecific" legitimacy assessments (that is, evaluations made without reference to an explicit normative benchmark) are quite frequent, with shares of roughly 20 per cent in both cases. These statements, which are no fully formed propositions in light of our legitimation grammar and may be viewed as less discursively rational because they offer no explicit justification (Gerhards 1997), are more often used in a positive fashion than critically (57 per cent of these statements are legitimating in Germany and 68 per cent in the United States). In other words, they represent a *legitimation resource,* a discursive practice typically used

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[4] Each of the three broad categories of speakers (journalists, political actors, civil society) was further subdivided. Thus journalists are distinguished by newspaper, political actors by the institution or branch of government they represent (and by government or opposition party affiliation), and civil society by actor groups (e.g., business, NGOs, academia, etc.). In addition, we distinguish between domestic and foreign speakers (marked "_others" in the graphs).

Figure 2:   German and US discourse networks, 1998–2007, all speaker types and legitimation criteria (N = 752 (DE); 1,233 (US))
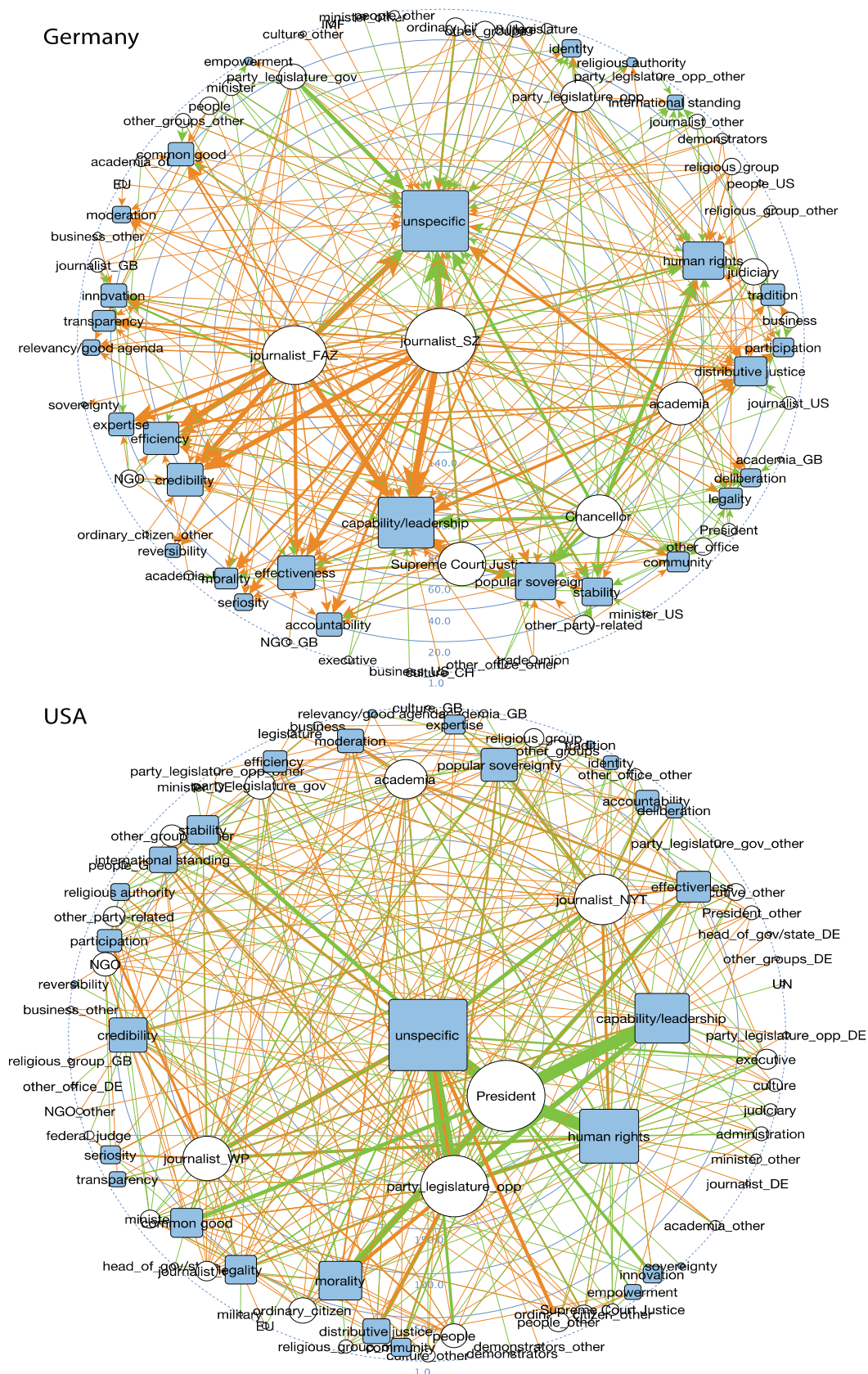
for the affirmation of national political orders and their elements. Conversely, delegitimating propositions are visibly more in need of argumentative backing or reason-giving.

Once again, it seems useful to aggregate our finer-grained categories. We therefore distinguish four groups of legitimation criteria; a twofold distinction between democratic and non-democratic as well as input and output criteria enables us to assess our data in light of prominent normative debates in the literature (Scharpf 1999: 17–28). As Table 3 (in the appendix) indicates, the distribution of these four groups of criteria in the German and American discourses is remarkably similar and the ranking – non-democratic output with 27 and 24 per cent, respectively, followed by democratic input, non-democratic input, and democratic output – is the same; only the category of democratic output (which notably includes evaluations in light of human and civil rights protection) is considerably more prominent in the United States (where this type of evaluations typically refers to "freedom" or "liberty") than in Germany.

Yet beyond such frequency distributions of individual variables, the graphs also visualize relationships between speaker types and legitimation criteria that are employed affirmatively or critically: While few speaker types contribute *only* positive or negative statements to the German or American discourse, and most draw on a remarkable variety of normative benchmarks to evaluate their political system and to justify their assessments, affinities between speaker types, the overall thrust of their evaluations, and privileged legitimation criteria emerge.

Such patterns – which will be examined in greater detail below – help us put the overall legitimacy levels of the German and American discourses (the percentage shares of legitimating as opposed to critical statements) into perspective. While the figures reveal a fair amount of contestation in both cases, legitimating statements (54 per cent) prevail in the United States; hardly more than a third of all statements (36 per cent) are positive in Germany. At first glance, the presence of many critical evaluations in the public spheres of the two countries may be interpreted as a sign of low regime support, but also as evidence for vivid, "healthy" political debates among "critical citizens" (Norris 1999). The ultimate meaning of these legitimacy levels very much hinges on the kinds of speakers that contribute positive or negative assessments, and on the criteria used by each of the speaker types to justify these evaluations.

CORE DISCOURSE NETWORKS

While the information density of the complete network graphs is remarkable (they contain information on all speaker types and their legitimacy assessments), there is clearly too much "noise" here for a more in-depth analysis. For instance, 25 of the speaker types distinguished by our coding scheme contributed less than five legitimation state-

ments to the German discourse over the examined ten-year period; it is reasonable to assume that they had a negligible influence. Likewise, in the complete US network, 256 edges have a line value of one, indicating that a legitimation criterion was used only once by a specific actor category between 1998 and 2007. For instance, the legitimation criterion "reversibility" was used once by the representative of an NGO and once by a member of the non-presidential party in Congress. The criterion therefore had little relevance for these speaker types and ultimately for the US legitimation discourse as a whole.

In order to eliminate some of this random noise and to highlight the more permanent structural features of the two discourse networks, we base our analysis in this section on network cores; more precisely, for the analysis of the affiliation networks we use the (5,2)-cores of the German and US affiliation networks. In general, a (k,m)-core of a network consists of the maximal sub-network in which each vertex has at least degree k and which contains the lines with a value of m and higher (de Nooy, Mrvar, and Batagelj 2005: 109). Subsequently, we consider networks consisting of all actor categories to which at least five evaluative statements were attributed in the press and all legitimation criteria that were mentioned at least five times; moreover, network relations are only considered if actors from the same category used the same argument at least twice in the ten-year period.[5] These low cut-off values were chosen to retain a maximum of complexity. Finally, unspecific evaluations were ignored, since they would have established connections between actors reflecting no more than their mutual lack of a genuine argument, and hence would have been of little substantive interest in an analysis of the normative orientations and foundations of different speaker types and their propositions.

Who exactly contributes to mediated legitimation discourses – or more precisely, whose voice is considered important by journalists? Which legitimation criteria do these speakers privilege, and do they tend to use them in an affirmative or a critical fashion? While we do not intend to formally test specific hypotheses on the link between discourses and institutional settings here, it appears plausible enough to probe such a link. For variation in institutional settings may create more or less favorable *discursive opportunity structures* for different types of speakers and legitimation statements. A prominent role in the constitutional or social order (e.g., governments, powerful organized interests) should translate into higher visibility, more press coverage and voice, and also a greater chance to feed one's own legitimacy assessments into public debates. While

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[5] Note that this procedure yields different networks depending on the reduction sequence. To retain the maximal number of nodes, we first removed all vertices with a degree < 5, then all lines with a value < 2, and finally removed isolates produced in the second step.

both Germany and the United States are established democracies and federal regimes, however, the former is a corporatist parliamentary system and the latter a presidential system with a more pluralist tradition of interest representation (Lijphart 1999). In line with such differences, governments and representatives of privileged corporative actors (business associations, trade unions) may be expected to be particularly dominant speaker types in the German parliamentary and corporatist system. By contrast, there might be more of a balance between the executive and the legislature as well as a broader range of speaker types associated with civil society in the legitimation discourses of the American presidential and pluralist system. Moreover, regimes and their core executive, legislative and judicial institutions are presumably linked with sets of norms. These affinities between institutions and norms might also create discursive opportunity structures, making some legitimation criteria more "acceptable" than others in public debates, more likely to be put forward, and also perhaps more likely to be employed in an affirmative fashion, especially by the incumbents of these institutions themselves (Schmidt 2008: 312).

Are such expectations corroborated by our data? Turning to the US discourse first (Figure 3), it is strongly centered on the President (almost 22 per cent of all statements), and he is also by far the most important legitimizer of the American political system (nearly 97 per cent of Bill Clinton's and George W. Bush's statements are affirmative). This finding underlines the extent to which the Presidency has become the core institution of the US system of government, not least due to the rhetorical and persuasive function of the office (Tulis 1987; Dorsey 2002). Its incumbent is not only the top newsmaker but also the leading motivational speaker of the nation. However, members of the non-presidential party in Congress are not far behind (16 per cent of all statements) and the thrust of their discursive contributions is mostly affirmative (59 per cent) as well. These two speaker types alone represent almost forty per cent of the legitimacy evaluations in the US data set. Journalists are the next most frequent speaker type (NYT: 10.9 %, WP: 8.4 %). As expected, their contributions are much more critical (legitimacy levels of 39 and 32 per cent, respectively). The high proportion of political actors in the mediated discourse and the relatively low share of assessments contributed by journalists themselves not least reflect the strong propensity of the American press to use direct quotes in their reporting (the President's State of the Union Address and other important speeches are frequently reprinted verbatim). There is only one more speaker type – academic experts – that represents more than five per cent of the identified legitimation statements; only about forty per cent of the evaluations made by this group are legitimating. Other speaker types have little voice, although the categories of individual "ordinary" citizens, NGO representatives, and "the people" at large each account for more than two per cent of all evaluations.

*Figure 3:   Legitimation discourses in the US, 1998–2007, (5,2)-core*
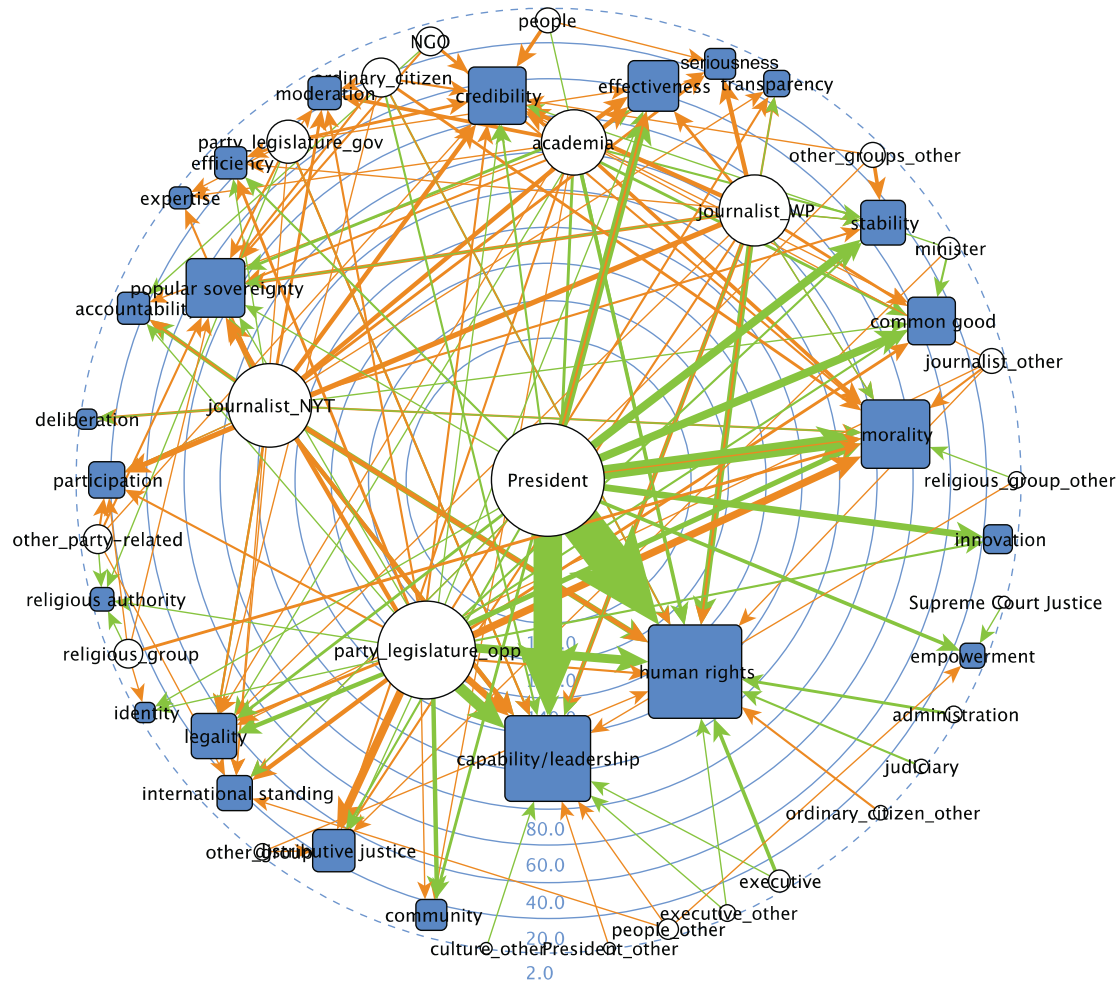
The German legitimation discourse (Figure 4) differs from the US discourse in that journalists themselves are the most central actors, responsible for 37 per cent of all legitimation statements; legitimacy levels of merely 26 (SZ) and 15 per cent (FAZ) indicate their highly critical perspective on the legitimacy of the German political system. Again, however, political actors (broadly speaking) are among the most prominent contributors to the discourse: Justices of the Federal Constitutional Court (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*) and the Chancellor, each with nine per cent of all legitimacy evaluations, and – barely below the five per cent threshold – oppositional party members. While the top executive's legitimating role in the German Chancellor democracy (Padgett 1994; Gast 2011) is almost as pronounced as the US President's (85 per cent of Gerhard Schröder's and Angela Merkel's legitimation statements reported in the press are affirmative), oppositional party members (46 per cent) and, interestingly, Constitutional Court Justices (23 per cent) are considerably more negative in their evaluations. Finally, with the exception of academia (nine per cent of all statements and a legitimacy

level of only 15 per cent), none of the speaker categories associated with civil society represent even two per cent of the identified evaluations.

In short, our analysis of speaker types confirms the expected role of journalists themselves in mediated legitimation discourses and reveals marked center-periphery structures in terms of other discourse participants. Core institutions of the political system and their representatives dominate legitimacy-related communication together with journalists, and there is little difference between Germany and the United States in that regard.

Figure 4: Legitimation discourse in Germany, 1998–2007, (5,2)-core
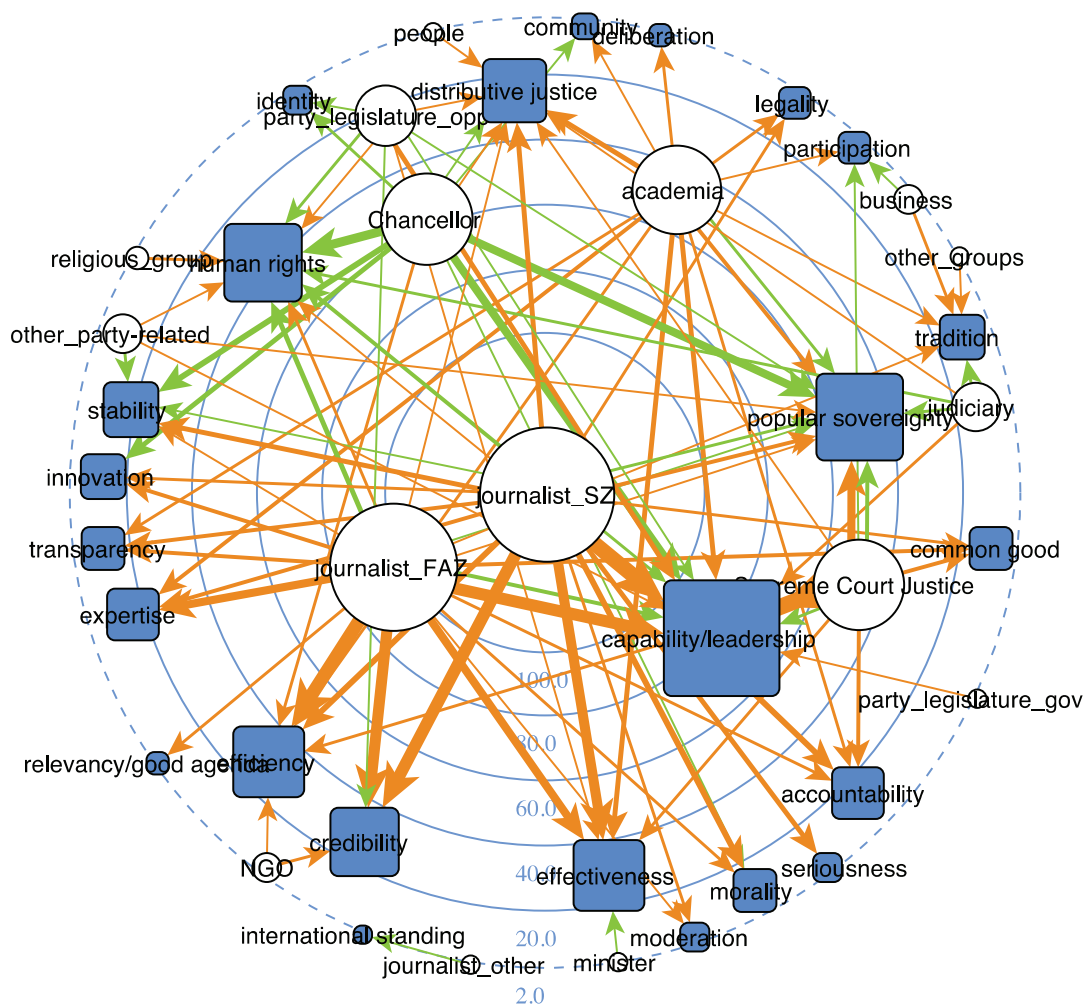
Yet in line with the logic of the presidential system, the relative weights of the Presidency and Congress are indeed fairly balanced in the US discourse, although the White House has a slight edge. The German discourse, on the other hand, reflects both the logic of a parliamentary system (the Chancellor and other speakers of the government side are clearly over-represented) and the unusually prominent role of the judiciary; the reverence for the Federal Constitutional Court is such that its members even get away with

a high level of criticism (Jestaedt et al. 2011). The role of speakers associated with civil society tends to be marginal in both cases, although they are slightly more visible in the US discourse. The corporatist v. pluralist nature of the German and US interest group systems does not appear to affect discursive structures very much. Trade unions and business associations as key players of German corporatism play a negligible role, and even in the United States there is only token representation of interest groups, NGOs, or religious organizations. The relatively prominent voice of academia is the only exception to the rule of negligible civil society influence. It is in line with the claim made by theorists of the knowledge society and more recently of discursive politics that the importance of expert knowledge in the political sphere has grown (Fischer 1993; Bell 1999).

Our data also broadly confirms the expectation that political elites usually contribute to legitimation discourses in an affirmative fashion while the media and civil society are more critical. However, some qualifications are necessary: Even speaker types associated with the regime and its core institutions, such as members of the German judiciary, may occasionally contribute delegitimating statements, perhaps in an effort to shift blame from one regime institution and its incumbents to another. Overall, then, a link between institutional settings, the greater or lesser prominence of different speaker types, and their mainly legitimating or delegitimating role emerges.

But how do these speakers justify their positive or negative evaluations of the German and the American system of government? The graphs also reveal that some evaluation standards dominate while others remain marginal in each case. In the US discourse, only four criteria are above a five per cent threshold: protection of human and civil rights (12 per cent of all statements), capability/leadership (11 per cent), morality (six per cent), and credibility (five per cent); nine more cross a two per cent threshold (popular sovereignty, effectiveness, common good orientation, stability, legality, international standing, distributive justice, moderation, participation). Only the (non-democratic input) criterion of capability/leadership as well as the (democratic output) criteria of human rights protection and common good orientation are used in a predominantly legitimating fashion (with associated legitimacy levels of 67 per cent, 78 per cent, and 61 per cent). As the network graph demonstrates, however, the legitimating use of these three (and a range of additional) criteria is very much tied to the Presidency and, to a lesser extent, to other institutions and representatives of the American system of government; by evaluating the system positively in light of such criteria these speakers also legitimate themselves. Journalists and civil society actually criticize the system from a variety of angles, although few if any criteria stand out.

In the German discourse, six criteria are above the five per cent threshold: capability/leadership (13 per cent), protection of human rights (seven per cent), popular sover-

eignty (seven per cent), effectiveness (six per cent), credibility (five per cent), and efficiency (five per cent); eleven more cross the two per cent threshold (distributive justice, stability, accountability, common good orientation, innovation, expertise, tradition, legality, morality, transparency, existence of a genuine *demos*/political community). The (democratic input) criteria of popular sovereignty and community (legitimacy levels of 55 and 53 per cent) as well as the (democratic and non-democratic output) criteria of human rights protection and stability (61 and 64 per cent) are somewhat more likely to be used in an affirmative fashion. As the network graph shows, the Chancellor and other political actors tend to use these and some other criteria to legitimate the system they represent but are not nearly as successful as their American counterparts in making themselves heard with these kinds of legitimacy evaluations. Journalists and civil society again use a broad range of criteria to delegitimate the system.

In sum, the most important finding with regard to legitimation criteria is arguably the range of evaluation standards used by the various speaker types. Particular affinities between speakers and privileged criteria emerge occasionally (for instance, capability/leadership and human rights protection in the case of the American President). Yet they are not always as expected (for instance, when the German Constitutional Court puts forward legitimation statements based on standards of capability/leadership and popular sovereignty as opposed to legality). Considering the distributions of legitimation criteria as indicators of broader political cultures, we find, on the one hand, remarkable similarities: Seven of the ten most widely used legitimation criteria in the German and US public spheres are the same; the standard of human rights protection serves as a legitimation resource (a criterion that is likely to underpin positive assessments) in both cases. Most criteria have a more negative thrust in Germany than in the United States, though, notably including the standards of capability/leadership and common good orientation; the core democratic input criteria of popular sovereignty and participation have legitimacy levels above 50 per cent in Germany. However, other democratic input criteria (credibility, accountability) are also relatively prominent in the German discourse and have a strongly negative thrust. The standards of efficiency, stability, and accountability make it only to the German list of the ten most prominent legitimation criteria while morality, legality, and international standing are only part of the American list.

Despite such differences, the structural similarities of the two legitimation discourses appear remarkably pronounced in light of the overall distribution of ties in the two discourse networks. Figure 6 presents a plot of the two degree distributions. It reveals almost identical exponential distribution structures with a low number of highly connected nodes and a very long tail of only weakly connected nodes. The two legitimation discourses show the typical degree distribution of small world networks (Watts 1999).

Whether this is a characteristic feature of *legitimacy-related* political communication or, instead, reflects a more fundamental media selection bias, and hence the general focus of attention on a limited number of actors, cannot be gleaned from our data. But the similar degree distribution and relatively high centralization of the two discourse networks (degree centralization DE: 0.42, US: 0.47) are indicators of structural similarities. Overall, the discourse networks reflect institutional differences. But the effect of these differences is mitigated by underlying structural similarities of the discourse networks – resulting in networks that are more similar than the political differences between Germany and the United States would suggest.

Figure 5:   Degree distribution in the US and German legitimation discourse networks (all ties, 1998–2007)
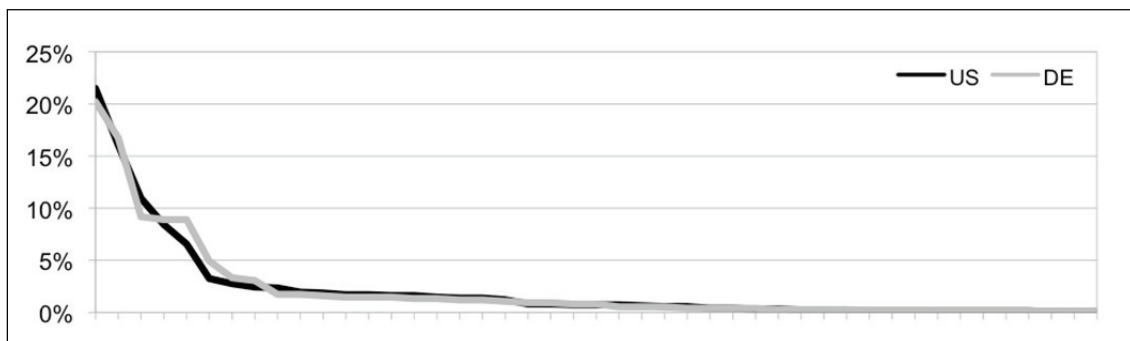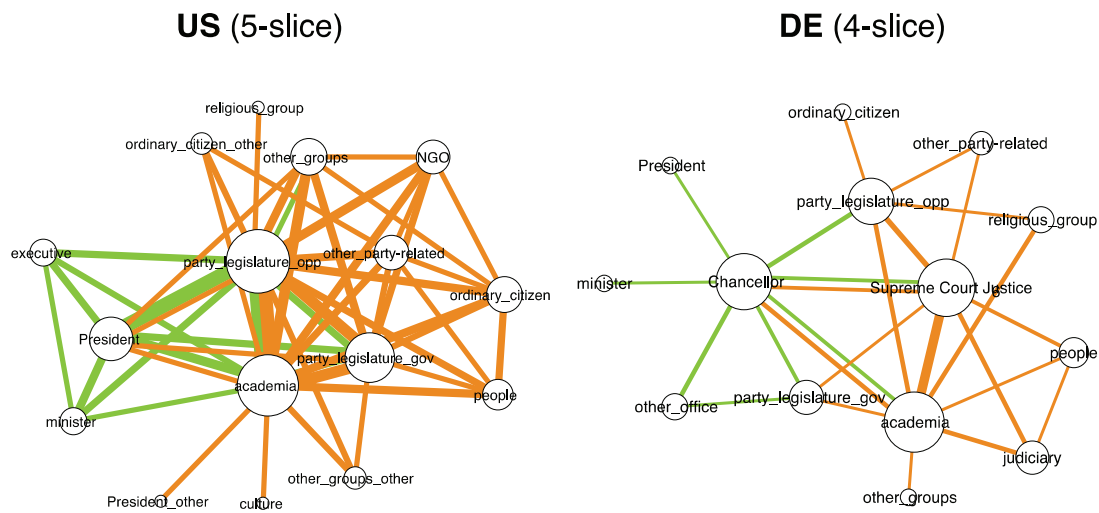

DISCOURSE COALITIONS

As shown above, both national legitimation discourses are dominated by a relatively small number of core actors, and many speaker types privilege specific legitimation criteria to affirm or contest the legitimacy of the two political systems and their institutions. In this section, we probe actor constellations: How are discourse participants connected to each other? Which speaker types put forward similar legitimacy evaluations? Do these coalition structures once again mirror the institutional arrangements of the two political systems? The examination of actor co-occurrence networks – in which actors are connected if they share one or more types of legitimacy evaluations – enable us to answer such questions. The following analysis of actor co-occurrence networks is based on network cores (*n*-slices) where actors are connected by sharing *n* legitimation patterns. Figure 6 depicts the 5-slices (US) and 4-slices (DE) of these networks.[6]

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[6]   Journalists were excluded from the actor co-occurrence networks because at the chosen level of aggregation – all journalists writing for a given newspaper are treated as a single collective actor – they would always have been connected to almost all other actors due to the great variety of legitimation criteria used by this speaker type.

Figure 6:   Actor co-occurrence networks, United States and Germany, 1998–2007

These core actor networks reveal the existence of legitimating and delegitimating discourse coalitions below the surface of the two national legitimation discourses. Despite the national idiosyncrasies examined in the previous section, the underlying structures are surprisingly similar. In both cases, the legitimating discourse coalition is centered on the top executive – the President and the Chancellor – and other government actors. Conversely, non-governmental actors dominate the delegitimating coalitions. Speakers associated with parties and legislatures as well as academia link these two coalitions. However, even the President and the Chancellor are directly linked with the delegitimating coalition, a result of the fact that not all of their legitimation statements are affirmative: While political elites presumably have a vested interest in the legitimation of the political system that they represent, they also engage in blame shifting and mutual criticism, and hence might put forward negative evaluations of specific regime principles, institutions, or actor groups. In short, while the exact composition of the German and US discourse coalitions once again reflects differences between the two political systems, the underlying structures reveal a meta-structure of political legitimation discourses in which roles and positions depend to a considerable extent on the institutional roles of actors within a polity.

CONCLUSION

Our discourse network analysis offers insights on the legitimation of political regimes in the quality press of Germany and the United States between 1998 and 2007. While there is some evidence for the impact of different journalistic styles, especially on the visibility of certain speaker types, analysis of the four newspaper-specific discourses (not shown in this paper) indicates that the corporatist or liberal structures of national media

systems in the United States and Germany as well as the varying ideological positions of the examined newspapers and their greater or lesser affinity to the governments of the day do not leave a strong mark on legitimation discourses.

Secondly, however, the affiliation networks of the US and German legitimation discourses reveal a structuring influence of each country's institutional design on the patterns of national legitimation discourses. Recently, scholars such as Vivien Schmidt have explored the relationship between institutional arrangements and discourses under the label of *discursive institutionalism* (Schmidt 2008). However, theories of legitimation have so far only acknowledged the general importance of democratic institutions, suggesting that reliable decision-making rules embedded in institutions can create procedural legitimation (Luhmann 1978). Our analysis of legitimation discourses points to another institutional effect: The institutional design of a polity influences the visibility of political actors and their access to legitimation discourses. This observation goes beyond the notion of differing agenda-setting powers (Baumgartner and Jones 2009). It suggests that the topography of institutions together with national media cultures provides opportunity structures that enhance the voice of some actors and restrict the chance to be heard of others. A regime's legitimacy is thus constructed and reproduced in a public sphere that offers differential access according to actor positions in the relevant set of institutions.

Thirdly, the differentiating effect of media systems and national institutions is mitigated by structural similarities of the discourse networks. A limited set of core actors and a limited set of core legitimation patterns dominate the discourse in both countries, leading to similar network metrics despite substantial differences.

Fourthly, the networks reveal a pattern of legitimating political actors and delegitimating non-state actors. On the one hand, this is not surprising, since we may expect rulers to defend the political system they represent. On the other hand, however, the dominant pattern that we see is not one in which government and opposition confront each other, but rather a conflict between political actors (including many oppositional party members) and (mostly) non-state actors, especially speakers associated with civil society. As tempting as it may seem for governments to attack opposition-dominated institutions and vice versa, and hence to instrumentalize legitimation discourses for partisan purposes, such discursive strategies are not very prominent. Instead, political actors in government and opposition roles assume responsibility for the legitimation of the systems they represent. The observed pattern supersedes the otherwise pronounced institutional differences between the democratic political systems of Germany and the United States. Hence legitimation discourses are composed of (self-)legitimating discourse coalitions anchored around political actors and delegitimating coalitions domi-

nated by non-state actors, while journalists of the German and US quality press provide both critical and, to some extent at least, affirmative evaluations.

The analysis of discourse networks thus enables us to detect patterns that structure the discursive behavior of actors within institutional arrangements. In this paper, we have not touched upon the dynamics of this behavior. Information about the temporal sequence of discursive interventions would permit a much more detailed analysis of the development of legitimation discourses over time. This analysis might reveal additional patterns, such as the impact of political event on legitimation discourses or the recursive influences of discourses upon themselves. It is, for instance, highly probable that legitimating or delegitimating claims respond to previous claims in a structured way (Schneider et al. 2010: chap. 5). With our limited sample of legitimation statements this option was not available, but further research should address these issues based on more extensive data sets. Moreover, the approach outlined here is, in principle, suitable for a much more detailed analysis of discourse coalitions. Again, due to restrictions of our data set we limited our analysis to the level of aggregated speaker types. The analysis of specific (individual or collective) actors along the lines developed in this article might also inform theories of policy networks and advocacy coalitions and connect them to the study of legitimation processes.

APPENDIX

Table 2: Legitimation statements by year, paper, and country

		Germany				United States		
		SZ	FAZ	Σ		NYT	WP	Σ
1998	*7-18/11*	52	54	*106*	*24/1-4/2*	52	46	*98*
1999	*20/11-1/12*	58	32	*90*	*16-27/1*	119	65	*184*
2000	*25/11-6/12*	27	19	*46*	*22/1-2/2*	59	39	*98*
2001	*24/11-5/12*	25	28	*53*	*27/1-7/2*	23	7	*30*
2002	*30/11-11/12*	47	37	*84*	*26/1-6/2*	66	28	*94*
2003	*22/11-3/12*	36	66	*102*	*25/1-5/2*	114	86	*200*
2004	*20/11-1/12*	45	70	*115*	*17-28/1*	87	86	*173*
2005	*26/11-7/12*	30	52	*82*	*29/1-9/2*	72	52	*124*
2006	*18-29/11*	29	15	*44*	*28/1-8/2*	82	66	*148*
2007	*24/11-5/12*	20	10	*30*	*20-31/1*	38	46	*84*
Σ		369	383	*752*		712	521	*1.233*

Table 3: Percentage shares (groups of legitimation objects and criteria, speaker types) and associated legitimacy levels (LL, %) by country

	Germany		United States	
	%	LL	%	LL
Object I	42.3	41.2	69.8	58.1
Object II	28.1	47.9	9.4	83.6
Object III	17.6	26.5	15.6	33.9
Object IV	12.1	3.3	5.2	6.3
DI	23.9	32.8	20.4	36.9
NDI	20.3	22.2	17.2	50.9
DO	10.6	45.0	17.0	73.3
NDO	27.1	31.4	23.7	44.2
Unspecific	18.0	57.0	21.7	68.2
Journalists	39.8	23.7	21.1	33.5
Political actors	36.7	56.2	52.4	73.1
Civil society	23.5	24.9	26.5	32.7
(Overall)		35.9		54.0

Note: object I = political community/system as a whole, object II = regime principles, object III = core institutions, object IV = major actor groups; DI = democratic input, NDI = non-democratic input, DO = democratic output, NDO = non-democratic output (Hurrelmann et al. 2009).

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