1 *Introduction*

Elite communication about the strengths and weaknesses of international organizations (IOs) is an increasingly common feature of global politics. As IOs have gained far-reaching political authority, in the expectation that they can help solve transboundary problems, they have also become more contested. While elites historically have been some of the staunchest supporters of international cooperation, they are now divided over the merits of IOs. Member governments criticize IOs for unpopular policies but also endorse them to protect multilateral arenas. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) challenge IOs for insufficient ambitions but also praise their efforts to consult with stakeholders. IOs themselves regularly trumpet their achievements in their public relations but also occasionally admit to their shortcomings. Recently, elite communication about IOs has gained additional topicality through the challenges from populist politicians on the right and the left, criticizing IOs for being undemocratic, politically biased, and detrimental to national sovereignty.

Consider the example of how elites around the world quarreled in public over the World Health Organization (WHO) following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. It all started with former United States (US) President Donald Trump sharply criticizing the WHO's response to the pandemic, which then escalated into a threat of withdrawing US funding, and eventually culminated in Trump declaring a termination of the US relationship with the WHO, since the organization had "failed to make the requested and greatly needed reforms" (CNN, May 29, 2020). Brazil's prime minister, Jair Bolsonaro, joined in the critique, calling the WHO a "partisan political organization" that had not acted responsibly and therefore lost credibility (Reuters, June 9, 2020). These criticisms and actions did not go unchallenged. Then German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed her "full support for the WHO" (Deutsche Welle, April 16, 2020), Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declared that "multilateral

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institutions like the WHO are extremely important, particularly at a time of a global health crisis" (CTV News, May 19, 2020), and Chinese President Xi Jinping underlined the decisive role of the WHO, which had made "a major contribution in leading and advancing the global response to COVID-19" (*China Daily*, May 18, 2020). NGOs and IOs too rushed to the defense of the WHO. For instance, the director of the Global Health Council stated that "WHO plays a central role in the global response to COVID-19, from country guidance to vaccine trials," while the spokesperson for the United Nations (UN) asserted that "WHO is showing the strength of the international health system" (Reuters, April 7, 2020).

Yet, despite the prominence of such elite communication in global politics, we know little about its effects on the popular legitimacy of IOs. While a growing scholarly literature explores the contestation around IOs, the consequences for legitimacy remain poorly understood. That citizens consider IOs to be legitimate is important from a democratic perspective, as IOs wield extensive power in world politics, often supplanting national decision-making. In addition, IOs, like all organizations, are more likely to govern effectively when they enjoy legitimacy. Popular legitimacy affects whether IOs remain relevant as political arenas, makes it easier for IOs to gain political support for ambitious new policies, and influences IOs' ability to secure compliance with international norms and rules.

The ambition of this book is to offer the first systematic assessment of the effects of elite communication on the popular legitimacy of IOs. Guided by the question of *whether, when, and why elite communication shapes citizens' legitimacy beliefs toward IOs*, it provides an in-depth analysis of how different elites affect public opinion on global governance. It addresses this question in ways that bridge scholarship in cognitive psychology, comparative politics, and international relations, and advances an expanding agenda of research on legitimacy in global governance.

We conceptualize elites as people who hold leading positions in political and societal organizations, citizens as the general public in a country, communication as discursive messages conveying information about a particular topic, and legitimacy as the belief that an institution exercises authority appropriately. Substantively, we explore the scope for party politicians, government bureaucrats, civil society representatives, and international officials to shape

popular legitimacy beliefs toward IOs through publicly communicated messages.

The book makes three distinct contributions to existing knowledge. First, we develop a novel theory of the effects of elite communication in global governance. While existing explanations attribute legitimacy beliefs to individual, institutional, and societal factors, our theory privileges the process of elite communication. Inspired by research on heuristic opinion formation, it assumes that citizens usually lack sufficient information to form independent opinions about IOs. Citizens therefore turn to communication by elites as an efficient shortcut to opinions. But reliance on elites for information comes with consequences. Our theory explains why communication empowers elites to shape the opinions of citizens and when those effects are particularly strong. It theorizes conditions for influence associated with each core component of the communicative situation – the elite, the message, and the citizen.

Second, we offer the most comprehensive empirical examination to date of the effects of elite communication in global governance. While research in American and comparative politics is rich in analyses of elite influence, this literature remains exclusively focused on the domestic setting. Only a handful of studies have examined the effects of elite communication in the international setting, mainly with a focus on the European Union (EU). In contrast, this book explores the effects of elite communication on popular legitimacy beliefs in a broad global governance context, drawing on comparative evidence from IOs in multiple issue areas and from countries in different world regions. This design allows us to identify general patterns and scope conditions in the influence of elites over citizens' legitimacy beliefs.

Third, we push the methodological frontier in research on the legitimacy of global governance. While the existing literature primarily relies on data from public opinion polls, this book makes use of experimental methods for causal inference, which are particularly well suited for establishing effects of elite communication. Experiments allow us to bypass the classic problem of establishing whether elites influence citizens or the other way around, and to identify the effects of elite communication under different conditions, while controlling for any other potential explanations of legitimacy beliefs. The book presents the results of five survey experiments conducted among

nationally representative samples of citizens, comprising both vignette and conjoint designs. Our approach makes legitimacy beliefs ever more tractable as a topic of social scientific research.

Our core findings are twofold. First, the way in which elites communicate about IOs matters extensively for citizens' evaluations of the legitimacy of these organizations. When elites criticize or endorse IOs in the public debate, citizens pay attention and adjust their opinions. This capacity to shape popular legitimacy beliefs extends across domestic and global elites, including political parties, member governments, NGOs, and IOs themselves. Moreover, elites can exercise influence by targeting a variety of IO qualities, from the degree of authority they exercise and the social purpose they pursue to the procedures they use and the performance they achieve.

Second, elites are more likely to shape citizen legitimacy perceptions under some conditions rather than others. These conditions are associated with each of the three components of the communicative situation: the elite, the message, and the citizen. Elites are more influential in shaping people's legitimacy perceptions when perceived as credible. In addition, elites are more influential when highly polarized, since polarization makes messages clearer and more distinct. Messages are more effective in shaping legitimacy beliefs when conveying negative rather than positive information about IOs. Moreover, messages targeting IOs that have been subject to less contestation in the past are more likely to influence people's opinions. Finally, citizens are more responsive to elite communication when they are ideologically closer to the elites issuing the messages.

Our results carry several broader implications for the understanding of politics. First, they speak to scholarship on the drivers of legitimacy in global governance, demonstrating that elite communication constitutes an independent source of such beliefs and that citizens care about the institutional qualities of IOs. Second, they engage with the rapidly growing literature on legitimation and delegitimation in global governance, showing that elites' communicative practices are not inconsequential positioning but have distinct implications for how citizens perceive IOs. Third, they contribute to research on elite influence in politics, identifying the ways in which communication effects in the global realm are similar to, or distinct from, corresponding dynamics in the domestic setting. Finally, our findings shed light on the recent backlash against IOs in world politics, explaining why elites of discontent

can shape and exploit public grievances for political gain and suggesting how supporters of international cooperation may fight back.

Research Problem

Elite contestation over the merits and demerits of IOs has become increasingly prominent over recent decades, fueled by growing divisions among elites over international cooperation and the advent of new channels of communication. On the one hand, IOs are frequently criticized by NGO representatives, leaders of rising powers, and populist politicians. On the other hand, many political and societal elites still defend IOs as necessary vehicles for collaboration on cross-border problems.

NGOs frequently level criticism against IOs (O'Brien et al. 2000; Scholte and Schnabel 2003; Beyeler and Kriesi 2005; Della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Pallas 2013; Kalm and Uhlin 2015; Sommerer 2016; Rauh and Zürn 2020). Protests organized by NGOs have attracted particular attention, possibly because of the political drama involved. Classic examples are the protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in 1999, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in Prague in 2000, the Group of Eight (G8) in Genoa in 2001, and the EU in Gothenburg in 2001. More recent examples include the protests against the EU and the IMF in Greece in 2015, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the EU and the US in 2015–2016, and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between Canada and the EU in 2017. As illustrated by these examples, NGO protests were particularly intense in the early 2000s and have primarily been directed at global economic governance (Sommerer 2016; Sommerer et al. 2022; Uhlin and Gregoratti 2022).

NGOs tend to target either the decision-making procedures of IOs, which are blamed for being undemocratic and inefficient, or the policy performances of IOs, which are attacked as ineffective and unfair in their consequences. Concerns with fairness and democracy are particularly prominent when NGO leaders have taken to the media (Rauh and Zürn 2020). Fairness concerns often relate to poverty alleviation, debt relief, social equality, environmental protection, and human rights, while democratic concerns often pertain to transparency, social accountability, civil society participation, and inequalities

in representation between the Global North and the Global South. In most cases, NGOs do not reject international cooperation per se; rather, they are dissatisfied with the way global governance is executed and, in some cases, actually want more rather than less of it (Zürn et al. 2019).

Another group of critics are the leaders of rising powers in world politics (Stephen and Zürn 2019; Kruck and Zangl 2020). Recent decades have witnessed a shift in the global distribution of power from established powers in Europe and North America to rising powers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Layne 2012; Brooks and Wohlworth 2015/2016). With the rise of new regional and global powers, the distribution of influence within this institutional order has been called into question. What may have appeared as a reasonable arrangement in times of Western dominance is increasingly seen as unjust and unreflective of economic and political realities. The distribution of structural capabilities has shifted decisively in favor of the rising powers, while the US and its allies are in relative decline – economically, demographically, and militarily.

This shift in geopolitical weight has gone hand in hand with demands for greater representation and influence in global governance. At the forefront of these demands are the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – but also other powers call for greater influence (Kruck and Zangl 2020). For instance, regional powers without permanent seats have called for institutional reforms that would make the UN Security Council (UNSC) more inclusive and egalitarian. China has demanded a recalibration of the system of voting weights in the IMF and the World Bank. Brazil and India have requested to become part of the core negotiating group of the WTO, previously restricted to the US, the EU, Japan, and Canada. These demands are intimately related to the legitimacy of the liberal international order (Stephen and Zürn 2019; Tallberg and Verhaegen 2020; Kentikelenis and Voeten 2021). "[T]he crisis of the liberal order is a crisis of legitimacy," as Ikenberry (2018, 19) puts it.

However, the most vociferous critics of IOs at the current point in time are likely the antiglobalist populists on the left and the right (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Hooghe et al. 2019; Adler and Drieschova 2021; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; De Vries et al. 2021; Söderbaum et al. 2021). Encouraged by electoral gains in recent years, populist politicians have made fierce criticism of IOs part and parcel

of their political message. Radical-left populists tend not to reject international cooperation per se as much as they question its distributive profile, arguing that IOs impose reforms that hurt countries and groups already worse off. Examples include the political parties Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, both of which rose to prominence in the wake of the Eurozone economic crisis. For instance, when serving as Greece's minister of finance, Syriza's Yanis Varoufakis famously accused the EU and the IMF of terrorism because of the conditions they imposed on the country (*The Guardian*, July 7, 2015).

More principled rejection of international cooperation comes from the far right. Right-wing populists tend to accuse IOs of undermining national sovereignty and contributing to sociocultural change by spurring economic, political, and cultural globalization. In their analysis, international cooperation is an elite project, distant from the true wishes of the people. In this vein, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French far-right party National Rally, declared globalization her enemy number one in the presidential election of 2017 (Politico, February 5, 2017), while Michael Gove, a leading advocate for Brexit, criticized the EU for being "distant, unaccountable, and elitist," before famously adding that "this country has had enough of experts from organizations with acronyms" (Sky News, June 3, 2016). Other examples include Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil dismissing the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyńksi of Poland challenging the EU, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines attacking the UN, and, of course, Donald Trump of the US criticizing multilateral cooperation in a range of IOs, including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), UNFCCC, WHO, and WTO.

Still, many – perhaps most – political and societal leaders around the world remain committed to international cooperation. In some cases, they have even stepped up the defense of multilateralism in response to the intensifying challenges from critical NGOs, rising powers, and antiglobalist populists. Politicians in the liberal mainstream speak up in favor of IOs, typically emphasizing their necessity for solving cross-border problems (De Vries et al. 2021). NGOs favorably disposed toward IOs highlight their role in fighting human rights violations, combating climate change, and preventing health pandemics (Stephen and Zürn 2019). Leaders in Western powers with a stake in the liberal international order defend current arrangements

as well functioning (Kruck and Zangl 2020). IOs themselves increasingly invest in public communication, justifying their operations and policies to a variety of stakeholders, from governments to citizens (Zaum 2013; Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018; Dingwerth et al. 2019; Bexell et al. 2022). Recent years have even seen the emergence of new advocates for global governance, such as global coalitions of city leaders and businesses working with the UNFCCC to address climate change.

This contestation over global governance presents us with a range of questions about the consequences of elite communication. Are the opponents of multilateralism getting through to citizens? Are the defenders of global governance able to counteract these attacks? If elites indeed are shaping how citizens think about international cooperation, then why are people susceptible to such communication? Is it because citizens mindlessly follow any elite who tries to lead them, or because they seek information and know just too well whom to trust, or because of some other reason? Moreover, are citizens particularly responsive to elite communication under some circumstances rather than others? For instance, does it depend on the elite engaging in communication, the nature of the message, and the characteristics of the citizen?

Getting traction on these questions is essential. Popular legitimacy is central to IOs' capacity to govern and achieve change in world politics. By uncovering the effects of elite communication on popular legitimacy beliefs, we can help to identify the factors that facilitate or impede effective global governance. As Buchanan and Keohane (2006, 407) put it: "The perception of legitimacy matters, because, in a democratic era, multilateral institutions will only thrive if they are viewed as legitimate by democratic publics."

First, legitimacy influences whether IOs remain relevant as arenas for states' efforts to coordinate policies and solve problems. In a world of forum shopping and organizational turf battles, legitimacy is a crucial resource for IOs wishing to fend off multilateral competitors and unilateral action (Morse and Keohane 2014; Zelli 2018). For instance, the dwindling legitimacy of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in many African countries is widely seen as a challenge for the court's relevance, leading to demands for the establishment of an African court (Clarke et al. 2016; Helfer and Showalter 2017). Conversely, states actively seek the endorsement of the UNSC because this lends international legitimacy to their actions, thereby further reaffirming the stature of this body (Hurd 2007; Binder and Heupel 2015).

Second, legitimacy affects the capacity of IOs to develop new rules and norms. When IOs suffer from poor legitimacy among citizens, this makes it more difficult to gain governments' support for ambitious policy goals and to secure ratification of new agreements (Putnam 1988; Martin 2000). For instance, successive rejections of new EU treaties by citizens in several countries have put plans for further large-scale reforms on the back burner. Most dramatically, British citizens in 2016 voted to leave the EU altogether, not only illustrating the importance of popular legitimacy for a state's active engagement in international cooperation but also the paralyzing effects of a legitimacy crisis on IO policy-making, as the EU was forced to focus its political energy on negotiating Brexit.

Third, legitimacy shapes IOs' ability to secure compliance with international rules and norms. Not only is legitimacy a much cheaper means to obtain compliance than coercion; in addition, few IOs command the coercive power to compel state and nonstate actors to comply, making legitimacy particularly important in global governance (Franck 1990; Hurd 1999). Evidence from a broad range of regulatory domains and levels suggests that legitimacy contributes to compliance, even when adjustment costs are high (Chayes and Chayes 1998; Zürn and Joerges 2005). Conversely, low legitimacy can hurt the respect for international rules. For instance, the weak legitimacy of the IMF has often hampered the implementation of its macroeconomic prescriptions in countries.

Finally, the popular legitimacy of IOs speaks to fundamental normative concerns about global governance. If IOs lack legitimacy in society, this contributes to a democratic deficit in global governance (Dahl 1999; Zürn 2000; Held and Koenig-Archibugi 2005). As political authority increasingly shifts to the global level (Hooghe et al. 2017; Zürn 2018), democracy's preservation requires that IOs are both structured in accordance with democratic principles and perceived by citizens as legitimate systems of governance. While the EU, for instance, may conform well to many democratic standards, and even features a directly elected parliament, it would be normatively problematic if European citizens did not have faith in its legitimacy. In this vein, the low turnout in European Parliament elections is oftentimes cited as an indication of the EU's faltering democratic legitimacy (Hix 2008; Schmidt 2012).

These benefits of legitimacy are not unique to IOs but mirror advantages for organizations, in general, emphasized by social theorists in a

variety of disciplines. Sociologists varyingly identify legitimacy as a crucial resource (Parsons 1960; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) or constitutive feature (Meyer and Scott 1983; DiMaggio and Powell 1991) of well-functioning organizations (Suchman 1995). Lawyers and psychologists stress how legitimacy creates a sense of obligation to defer to the decisions of an authority (Milgram 1974; Franck 1990; Tyler 1990). Political scientists highlight the role of popular legitimacy in a well-functioning democracy (Habermas 1976; Beetham 1991; Dahl and Lindblom 1992) and assess the consequences of political systems possessing larger or smaller amounts of it (Hetherington 2005; Booth and Seligson 2009; Norris 2011).

Argument

This book advances a novel theory about the effects of elite communication on citizen legitimacy beliefs toward IOs. We conceive of elites as people who hold leading positions in key organizations in society that strive to be politically influential (Mosca 1939; Khan 2012; Verhaegen et al. 2021). This understanding includes both political and societal elites, and both global and domestic elites. We conceptualize citizens as the general public in a country. Citizens are political subjects with rights and responsibilities as members of the public (Dewey 1927), whose collective opinions may be studied through nationally representative polls. We understand communication as discursive or verbal messages that convey information about a particular topic. Communication is a process of transmission and interpretation that involves a source, a message, and a receiver (Fiske 2011). Finally, as explained at greater length in Chapter 3, we conceive of legitimacy in sociological or empirical terms as the belief or perception that an institution exercises authority appropriately (Weber 1922/1978; Tallberg and Zürn 2019).

Our theory explains why citizens are susceptible to elite communication and when those effects are particularly strong. It starts from the assumption that elites deliberately seek to influence how citizens perceive IOs and that citizens are receptive to such communication because of information deficits. It then theorizes the conditions under which citizens are more or less likely to be influenced by elites, focusing on the core components of the communicative situation – the elite, the message, and the citizen. Our theory suggests that citizens' legitimacy beliefs toward IOs are profoundly shaped by how elites speak about IOs but also that such effects vary in predictable ways.