The quest for legitimacy in world politics – international institutions’ legitimation strategies

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1 Introduction

Over the course of the past decades, political authority has been delegated to and pooled at international institutions.¹ As a result, the legitimacy of political authority beyond the nation state has not only become an issue of scholarly debates,² but international institutions themselves are taking an increasing interest in the management of their legitimacy. They employ legitimation strategies, including press conferences, speeches, communication and symbolic policies as well as institutional and organizational reforms to convince different ‘social constituencies of legitimation’³ of their right to rule. In line with this empirical observation, the Commonwealth Heads of Government consider obtaining ‘legitimacy not only [from] their member states but also [from] the wider international community in order to command confidence and commitment’ to be the first guiding principle for ‘reform and construction of new international institutions’.⁴

Yet, International Relations (IR) research has only recently started to investigate the causes and consequences of international institutions’ legitimation strategies.⁵ Consequently, a theoretical embedding and systematic conceptualization has not yet

been achieved, although deeper insights into international institutions’ legitimation strategies – in addition to other explanatory factors – can greatly enrich how we understand and explain legitimation processes in world politics and the complex forms, functions, and dynamics of international institutions.

To fill this void, this paper offers three contributions: First, a theoretical perspective of legitimation processes is introduced. Secondly, we provide an empirically applicable conceptualization of legitimation strategies that is amenable to observation and analysis, and thirdly, the added value of the approach is demonstrated by empirical case studies on the legitimation strategies of the Group of Eight (G8) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in times of crisis. Theoretically, we propose a top-down perspective, which focuses on international institutions’ legitimation strategies. To develop this perspective, we draw Max Weber, who alluded to legitimation strategies in his work on the sociology of rule. We link Weber’s propositions to recent IR research on legitimacy management and combine them with insights from organization studies.

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Conceptually, we deduce our definition of legitimation strategies from David Easton’s work\textsuperscript{10} and distinguish between three types of constituencies from which international institutions seek legitimacy. We show that international institutions do not only strive for legitimacy from member states but also from civil servants working for international institutions’ bureaucracies and the broader public. Our core argument is that international institutions employ different legitimation strategies depending on the addressed constituency. Analyzing these three types of legitimation strategies and their interaction more systematically will enrich our understanding of how the communication, behavior, and institutional transformation of international institutions unfold and why some institutions are more successful than others in managing their legitimacy.

The article is organized as follows: subsequent to an overview about the major themes of legitimacy research in IR, we point out that legitimacy is the result of an interactive process that relies both on the bottom-up attribution of legitimacy to international institutions by social constituencies \textit{and} on legitimacy claims made by political elites. Second, we situate legitimation strategies in the context of empirical legitimacy theory and provide a conceptualization that takes into account different addressees of legitimation. Third, we demonstrate the empirical applicability and relevance of our approach by applying it to the analysis of legitimation strategies

launched by the G8 and the IMF. The case studies reveal that international institutions of different institutional design do indeed take into account different constituencies when designing legitimation strategies and that both institutions’ quest for legitimacy has implications for their communication, behavior, and institutional design.

2 Legitimacy and international institutions

The concept of legitimacy which denotes ‘one of the central issues of social science’, namely the justification of the right to rule, has carved out a rather modest existence in past IR research. Over the past two decades, this has been changing and legitimacy research has become pivotal in IR. This section reviews three central themes in the literature, ranging from its beginnings in classical IR theorizing over regime theory to recent approaches of global governance: the distinction between normative and empirical research, the actors who are assumed to be of relevance, and the ways in which agency and legitimacy relationships are conceptualized.

Early IR writings were often characterized by the conceptual blurring of normative and empirical perspectives which we hope to avoid in this paper. From a

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normative perspective, legitimacy research is interested in the rightfulness or acceptability of political authority based on normative criteria such as democracy or justice. While the applied normative standards may vary, these approaches invariably presume legitimacy to be ‘a property or characteristic of regimes which satisfy criteria laid out by the observer’. Researchers are either concerned with the *prescriptive* formulation of criteria for the acceptability of international institution’s rule or with the *diagnostic* evaluation of existing institutions against the backdrop of normative standards.

Our contribution is rooted in empirical legitimacy research which draws on Weber’s work on legitimate rule and is concerned with the social recognition of international institutions by those subjected to their rule or, to be more precise, ‘with the extent and the (reproduction) of the kind of regime support that goes by the name of legitimacy’. This research assumes an observer perspective analyzing the legitimacy claims and beliefs of rulers and ruled, as well as practices and strategies which underpin

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19 Weber, 'Economy and Society'.
the attribution or withdrawal of legitimacy as social facts.\textsuperscript{21} Here, rule is considered to be legitimate ‘if its subjects believe it to be so’.\textsuperscript{22} From this perspective, the questions of whether international institutions are in need of legitimacy, have the potential to tap sources of legitimacy, or are seen as being more or less legitimate, become purely empirical issues.\textsuperscript{23}

Beginning with the debates on international regimes, IR scholars discovered the emergence of political authority beyond the state and started asking empirical questions about the legitimacy of regimes and their democratic quality.\textsuperscript{24} The common starting point for these state centric discussions on the legitimacy of international institutions has been Henkin’s puzzle of why ‘[a]lmost all nations observe almost all principles of international law and almost all of their obligations all of the time’.\textsuperscript{25} These early studies on the empirical legitimacy of international institutions argued that – given the lack of an overarching coercive force – state compliance with international regulations has to rely on self-interest or legitimacy.\textsuperscript{26}

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\item \textsuperscript{22} Clark, ‘Legitimacy in International Society’, p. 79.
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The advent of global governance research has contributed to a widening of perspective. While empirical enquiries rooted in regime theory were mainly concerned with the legitimacy relationship between international institutions and state governments, the growth of protests accompanying major international conferences during the 1990s27 drew attention to what Clark has called world society. 28 These studies proceeded from the observation that ‘[e]mpirically, non-governmental actors and social movements play such a decisive role in debating and challenging the legitimacy of international governance that we are justified in regarding them as its ultimate rule addressees and judges of its legitimacy’.29

3 Legitimation strategies: theoretical foundation and concept formation

Most of the exiting literature on the empirical legitimacy of international institutions30 conceptualizes legitimacy as a bottom-up relationship between international institutions and their various social constituencies identified by global governance research. We argue that this perspective is too narrow as it misses the ‘genetic’ aspect of

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28 Clark, 'International Legitimacy and World Society'.
30 We define international institutions broadly to include regional and global organization, clubs of governance, regimes, and networks governed by formal international agreements.
Legitimacy is and can only be the result of an interactive political process between rulers and ruled. These processes of legitimation culminating in the (non-)attribution of legitimacy comprise both the bottom-up attribution of legitimacy by social constituencies and the top-down cultivation of legitimacy by rulers. At the core of this interactive understanding of legitimation lies that individuals do not attribute legitimacy to international institutions in a societal vacuum but are constantly influenced by many factors such as international institutions’ policy outputs, external shocks, and legitimacy claims by a plethora of actors. As regards the latter, Weber emphasized a top-down perspective on legitimation processes: 'Experience shows that in no instance does domination voluntarily limit itself to the appeal to material or affectual or ideal interests as a basis for its continuance. In addition, every such system attempts to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy'. These legitimacy claims are ‘the lifeblood of politics of legitimation and such politics is essential to the cultivation and maintenance of an actor’s or institution’s legitimacy’.

We follow these suggestions and focus on the role of international institutions and their representatives in legitimation processes. In order to reconstruct the legitimacy

33 Brasset and Tsingou, 'The Politics of Legitimate Global Governance'.
36 Reus-Smit, 'International Crisis of Legitimacy', p. 159.
evaluations and principles that prevail in different constituencies of legitimation and to better understand the communication and behavior of international institutions, it is necessary to take their legitimation strategies into account. The reason why these efforts can be expected to play an important role in processes of legitimation is given by Easton, who argues that a few powerful actors commanding the necessary organizational resources and skills may be able to make their legitimacy claims hold greater weight than those of the unorganized millions. Although originally limited to the competition between different constituencies of legitimation, the argument can be extended to understand the significance of international institutions’ legitimation strategies. Because international institutions command expertise and are integrated into networks that provide them with access to national political elites and the broader public, their representatives are in a privileged position to shape the legitimacy perceptions of their constituencies. To be sure, this emphasis on the top-down ‘impulse of the powerful to try to legitimate their power’ does not aim at replacing subjects of rule as the crucial constituency which ultimately lends or revokes legitimacy on the basis of many different considerations like the output of international institutions, criticism uttered in public, or external shocks. Rather, we attempt to broaden the perspective on how legitimacy is constantly reproduced, what role international institutions themselves and

38 Hurd, 'Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics', p. 388.
their representatives play in these processes, and how their quest for legitimacy influences institutional design, behavior, and communication.

To access international institutions’ legitimation strategies empirically, we propose the following definition: *legitimation strategies are goal-oriented activities employed to establish and maintain a reliable basis of diffuse support for a political regime by its social constituencies.* This definition builds on a widely accepted and empirically applied understanding of *legitimacy as the diffuse support for political regimes.*

It is premised on two distinctions: first, we differentiate between diffuse support and specific support. While reasons for supporting political regimes may range from mere apathy to individual cost-benefit calculation, diffuse support is a distinct category defined as a ‘reservoir of favorable attitudes or good will that helps members to accept or tolerate outputs to which they are opposed or the effect of which they see as damaging to their wants’. When a reliable basis of diffuse support is existent, neither coercion nor bribery is needed to create obedience to authority. Institutions commanding this diffuse support are more likely to achieve compliance with their rule, they can draw on the active support of actors who do more than simply comply, and

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42 Hurd, 'Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics', p. 387.
they benefit from lower costs of coercion and bribery. Consequently, legitimation strategies can be distinguished from strategies designed to win specific support, which rely on onetime inducements or means of coercion. Legitimation strategies aim at generating a more robust and sustainable basis of favorable attitudes based on explicitly normative considerations.

Second, legitimation strategies are connected to political regimes. As Easton claims, the term legitimacy should be reserved for political regimes, i.e. political institutions establishing authority, like the nation state or international institutions, and should not be applied to political authorities or policies. Diffuse support can only be directed to political institutions themselves, whereas specific support can also be extended to incumbent authorities and policies. Diffuse support for regimes represents an enduring bond that enables subjects of rule to oppose the incumbents of offices and their policies and yet retain support to the offices and institutions themselves.

Consequently, legitimation strategies are distinct from the policy output of international institutions and from other strategies employed to win support for individual authorities or their particular policies. The United Nations (UN) Secretary-

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44 Note that Easton explicitly understands even the weak international institutions of his time as political structures to which the concept of legitimacy can be applied and which are in need of legitimacy Easton, 'A Systems Analysis of Political Life', p. 284.
45 Easton, 'A Systems Analysis of Political Life', Ch. 11-12; Easton, 'A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support', p. 445.
46 Easton, 'A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support', p. 437.
General Ban Ki-moon’s campaign *UNiTE* to end violence against women\(^{47}\), for instance, is a public relations effort which aims to generate support for a specific policy, whereas the European Union (EU) Commission’s campaign\(^{48}\) *EU Agencies: Whatever you do, we work for you* is a legitimation strategy which seeks to cultivate diffuse support for the European system of independent agencies. Clearly, public relation strategies and even policy output may also shape legitimacy perceptions, but their effects are beyond the concept of legitimation strategies.

This definition does not only help to differentiate legitimation strategies from neighboring concepts such as promotion or public relations in terms of difficult to observe objectives, but also in terms of the practical means available for cultivating diffuse support. While public relations strategies are open to many different forms, because they serve the less demanding task of creating specific support, legitimation strategies are invariably characterized by recourse to social norms and the logic of appropriateness. Legitimation strategies aim at generating or signaling conformity with established social norms of legitimate authority. Empirically, this aim becomes visible when international institutions’ representatives justify the identity and purpose of the institution to their constituencies.

\(^{47}\) United Nations, *UNiTE to END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN* (New York: UN Departement of Public Information, 2010).

\(^{48}\) European Commission, *EU Agencies: Whatever you do, we work for you* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2007).
The link between an institution and the prevailing norms in a given society is constituted by the institution’s identity; i.e. a set of shared rules, rituals, and beliefs that shape decision making processes by specifying the basic assumptions, or the correct way to perceive, think, and feel about the world. A clear institutional identity is necessary for an institution to project itself to its constituencies. These projections work as a ‘centripetal force’ on which support for an institution is based. Projected images based on institutional identities allow observers to develop a sense of shared belonging, i.e. to identify with the institution. ‘Identification is the key to understanding legitimation, and legitimation is one of the principal functions of identification. Each concept is incomplete in itself – brought together they become a powerful form of explanation.’ Cultivating the legitimacy of international institutions, thus, implies calibrating the relationship between the institution’s institutional identity, and the prevailing social norms that define the parameters of rightful rule. This nexus between identity and legitimation suggests that international institutions’ quest for legitimacy can have substantive implications for what they say and do in the world.

In general, international institutions can try to achieve its congruency with prevailing norms in two ways: first, they may signal by way of purely communicative

50 Oelsner, 'The Institutional Identity of Regional Organizations, Or Mercosur's Identity Crisis', p. 115-119.
51 Barker, 'Legitimating Identities: The Self-Presentation of Rulers and Subjects', p. 35.
means that the institution’s identity and purpose are in line with the normative expectations of a given legitimacy constituency.\textsuperscript{53} These discursive legitimation strategies are observable when international institutions’ representatives engage in proactive communication in which they justify institutional identity and purpose on the basis of social norms. Contrary to other components of their communication in documents, speeches, and audio-visual material which reports about the institution’s activities in a value-neutral format, these legitimacy claims make use of evaluative and normatively laden language to (re)define and present the institution as a force for the normative good, like poverty reduction, the protection of human rights, or the promotion of democracy. These legitimacy claims can for instance be identified by content analytical methods.

Second, legitimation strategies can assume more substantive forms of behavioral adaptation and institutional change.\textsuperscript{54} Especially in times of legitimacy crisis, when international institutions realize that a discursive legitimation strategy may not be sufficient to regain support, they might find themselves forced to update their institutional identity in order to conform to the prevailing normative expectations.\textsuperscript{55} These institutional legitimation strategies can take the form of a general revision of

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\item Zaum, 'Legitimating International Organizations', p. 224.
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governance targets, the introduction of new procedures, or even the adaptation of the institutional design increasing for instance the accessibility of the institution or giving it a multilateral form.  

While discursive legitimation strategies manifest in a change of language and little substantive transformation, institutional strategies are rooted in a more fundamental adaptation of institutional identity. Especially when an institution’s purpose and principles are under siege, members and staff are likely to reconsider and reformulate institutional identity. To analyze these more substantive legitimation strategies resulting from such identity transformations, international institutions’ central documents such as treaty revisions, annual communiqués/reports, and other writings introducing institutional transformations (i.e. accountability reports) may be examined. In addition to information on the kind of institutional change, this research needs to explore the social norms and legitimacy demands to be addressed with these reforms.

For conceptual clarity, we have introduced these two basic types of legitimation strategies – discursive and institutional – as ideal types. In practice, they are often mixed and blend into hybrid forms, because pure communication without identity updating and institutional adaptation is likely to result in failure or rhetorical entrapment, whereas pure adaptation without communication is unlikely to yield

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substantial legitimacy gains. Rather than treating this distinction as categorical, it should be regarded as a continuum in which discursive legitimacy claims and substantive institutional adaptation constitute the extreme points.

4 Producers and addressees of legitimation strategies

Having delineated the concept of legitimation strategies, the following section specifies the agents of legitimation and their addressees, i.e. the constituencies of legitimation.

Given the focus of the article, we concentrate on top-level representatives of international institutions as producers of legitimation strategies. Ideal-typically, this group encompasses Director-Generals and Deputy Directors General. The matter is more complex in international institutions which only have a marginal or no independent bureaucratic staff. The G8, the G20, and similar club formats do not have full-fledged secretariats comparable to other international institutions. Nonetheless, they apply legitimation strategies. Here, our own research shows that the annually rotating chairs assume the role of producers of legitimation strategies.

That said, the main argument of this section is that there are three legitimacy constituencies which may hold different normative parameters on the rightful authority of international institutions and which, therefore, demand for different types of

legitimation strategies. Contrary to common wisdom, international institutions do not only have to bolster their legitimacy in the eyes of member governments but would do well to also address the normative expectations of their administrative staff and the wider public. Clearly, international institution cannot fully satisfy the normative expectations of all of the three addresses. Rather, legitimation strategies have to balance different demands. The failure to do so is likely to result in failure of individual strategies or even in the emergence of legitimacy crises. In the following, we differentiate three types of legitimation strategies: intergovernmental, bureaucratic, and public legitimation strategies.

4.1 Intergovernmental legitimation strategies

Intergovernmental legitimation strategies address member state governments. Most research dealing with the legitimacy of international institutions has traditionally focused on this type of legitimation, because in IR legitimacy has long been considered to be an issue between states.

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59 For a critical discussion of this state-centric perspective see Steffek, 'Legitimacy in International Relations: From State Compliance to Citizen Consensus'.
60 Suchman, 'Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches', p. 585.
62 E.g. Hurd, 'Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics', p. 401.
63 Steffek, 'Legitimacy in International Relations: From State Compliance to Citizen Consensus', p. 175.
In this view, member state governments are the only relevant addressees of legitimation strategies for two main reasons: first, member states are international institutions’ principals. They provide resources and are capable of withdrawing authority.64 Albeit to a varying degree, international institutions’ fate depends on the social recognition by their members. This is not to say that national governments provide resources only because they accept an institution as legitimate. Material interests and other strategic motives play an important role as well,65 but only member states’ belief in the legitimacy of an institution provides a reliable basis for the continued functioning of institutions.

Second, international institutions care about the legitimacy beliefs of governments, because nation states are the main addressees of their rule. While some international institutions address individuals directly, most of the time international institutions aim to alter the behavior of member states. And since the majority of international institutions lack the ‘carrots and sticks’ necessary to induce state compliance, they have strong incentives to justify themselves vis-à-vis their member states to improve compliance.66

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Empirical research on intergovernmental legitimation strategies focuses on international institutions’ capacity to address joint problems and generate public goods.\textsuperscript{67} Effectiveness is often seen as the primary source of international institutions’ legitimacy\textsuperscript{68} and most research focuses, thus, on discursive and institutional legitimation strategies addressing this dimension of international institutions.

### 4.2 Bureaucratic legitimation strategies

The concept of bureaucratic legitimation strategies draws attention to a rather neglected aspect of empirical legitimacy research, i.e. to processes of top-down legitimation within the bureaucracy of international institutions. Bureaucracies are organizationally separate from plenary assemblies – i.e. national representatives – and have a formal autonomy vis-à-vis their member states.\textsuperscript{69} Since the administrative turn in IR, they are frequently considered ‘a key engine of international organization’ and thus an important legitimation constituency.\textsuperscript{70} The agents of bureaucratic legitimation are top-level civil servants; addressees are medium and low level civil servants. More informal institutions

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\textsuperscript{70} Trondal, Marcussen, Larsson and Veggeland, \textit{Unpacking International Organizations} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 5.
such as the G8 and the G20 ‘borrow’ their staff from member state administrations.\textsuperscript{71}

These teams of ‘borrowed’ staff members are the addressees of bureaucratic legitimacy strategies of less formalized institutions.\textsuperscript{72}

Weber considered the administrative staff to play a pivotal role for political orders, because rule over a considerable number of persons requires a staff which can be trusted to execute the general policy as well as specific commands. Although this administrative staff is bound to obedience by a variety of motives, the basis of this relation of rule is the belief in its legitimacy.\textsuperscript{73} The quality of this mélange of legitimacy beliefs and motives of staff largely determines the way in which an institution executes its tasks: ‘[…] according to the kind of legitimacy which is claimed, the type of obedience, the kind of administrative staff developed to guarantee it, and the mode of exercising authority, will all differ fundamentally’.\textsuperscript{74} Staff members’ belief in the legitimacy of an international institution’s authority and its inner relations of rule is, thus, of vital importance for international institutions. Only if the staff disposes of a pool of legitimacy beliefs, can it be expected to form a sufficiently reliable basis for the

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\textsuperscript{72} Consequently, national civil servants being in charge for the G8 and the G20 are the addressees of legitimation strategies of both national governments and the international institution’s chairs. This multiple position has been confirmed during our interview with the head of the British G8 sherpa team in 2013.
\textsuperscript{73} Weber, ‘Economy and Society’, p. 212.
\textsuperscript{74} Weber, ‘Economy and Society’, p. 213. Although not discussed explicitly by Easton, ‘A Systems Analysis of Political Life’, p. 154., who does not specify the relevant constituencies of legitimation, we claim that the diffuse support for international institutions by their staff member – for instance backed by the belief in the rationality and legality of bureaucracies – is an important element of their legitimacy.
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authority of the institution, making it well equipped to operate.\textsuperscript{75} Hence, the aim of bureaucratic legitimation strategies is to cultivate positive legitimacy beliefs within the institution’s staff, for instance by generating conformity with virtues of formalized procedure and the abstract codification of impersonal rules.\textsuperscript{76}

It has only been recently that IR scholars have started to investigate the role played by international bureaucracies and how their legitimacy concerns are addressed.\textsuperscript{77} Most research focuses on organizational cultures and reforms, i.e. changes of internal rules and procedures, horizontal and vertical co-ordination, planning, monitoring, transparency, professional ethics, and administrative recruitment.\textsuperscript{78} Schön-Quinlivan demonstrates for instance how administrative reform of the EU Commission helped to improve legitimacy perceptions between different Directorates-General within the Commission and of the Commission as a whole.\textsuperscript{79}

Oelsner has broadened the perspective to include institutional identities as an important source of legitimacy. She argues that international institutions need to poses a distinct institutional identity to shape the legitimacy beliefs of their constituencies.

Through leadership, professionalization, and discursive strategies, central bureaucrats

\textsuperscript{75} Suchman, ‘Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches’, p. 574.
\textsuperscript{76} Barker, ‘Legitimating Identities: The Self-Presentation of Rulers and Subjects’, pp. 31; 42.
\textsuperscript{77} Exceptions are Barnett and Finnemore, ‘Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics’; Trondal, Marcussen, Larsson and Veggeland, ‘Unpacking International Organizations’.
\textsuperscript{78} Nelson and Weaver, ‘The Cultures of International Organizations’.
shape the identity of staff members. Jean Monnet and Henri Spaak are for instance credited for shaping the European Communities’ identity. Raúl Prebisch played a similar role in the context of the Latin American Free Trade Organization (LAFTA), and Trygve Lie and Dag Hammarskjold are often portrayed as having shaped UN’s institutional identity.

4.3 Public legitimation strategies

Finally, international institutions aim to legitimate themselves in the eyes of the wider public. This constituency includes the media, NGOs and private actors, but also other international institutions and non-member states. In sum, this category comprises the unstable and sometimes not easily recognizable compound of public opinions held by citizens, movements, and epistemic communities who feel affected by an international institution or who are constructed as an affected constituency by the international institution. To address the potentially diverging concerns of this broad group, public legitimation strategies have to target very general and broad norms. Thus, they often aim at widely shared norms such as the promotion of the global common good and

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80 Oelsner, ‘The Institutional Identity of Regional Organizations, Or Mercosur's Identity Crisis’.
democratic governance, for instance by establishing or reforming transparency and accountability measures.  

Conventionally, the public is rarely considered a relevant legitimacy constituency of international institution, because (a) it does not hold clear views on international politics and (b) even if it had clearly developed beliefs, these would be of no consequence, because neither its active support nor its compliance with international rules are relevant for the functioning of international institutions. Recent research has shown that both of these conventional wisdoms are no longer valid and that the public has become an important constituency of legitimation: first, international institutions have become a bone of contention in public debates and mass protests addressing for instance the G8 or the IMF are only the most visible indicators of this societal politicization of international institutions.  

Second, international institutions cannot ignore this constituency because quite frequently they compensate for their lack of means of coercion or bribery by orchestrating public intermediaries to foster state compliance. Legitimacy is an important resource for mobilizing these intermediaries.

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84 On widely excepted norms of legitimate authority see for instance Keohane, 'Global Governance and Legitimacy', ibid.
Research on public legitimation strategies has become more fashionable in the past years. This work focuses mostly on transparency, accountability, and accessibility.\textsuperscript{87} Regularly, participatory measures were implemented as a direct response to charges of illegitimacy voiced by NGOs.\textsuperscript{88}

5  Empirical plausibility probe: G8 and IMF in times of legitimacy crisis

To probe the empirical plausibility and analytical utility of the concept of legitimation strategies, we look at two prominent international institutions: the G8 and the IMF. We have selected these cases not only because they have experienced legitimacy crises and had varying success in managing them, but also because they vary substantially in terms of institutional design, purpose, and membership. To be sure, this case selection does not aim to isolate individual drivers of legitimation strategies or their outcomes by way of comparative case studies. Rather, the high information intensity during legitimacy crises and the numerous significant differences between both cases enable us to demonstrate that the concept travels well across different contexts and subsets of international institutions. In an area in which the international sphere is populated by


many different types of actors, this broad applicability is an important asset of a novel concept.

Both cases demonstrate that international institutions care about the legitimacy perceptions of their members, bureaucratic staff, and the public. Our analysis shows that due to substantial legitimation crises both the G8 and the IMF adapt what they say and do to address the legitimacy concerns of their constituencies. Both institutions must, thus, be considered to be normative creatures who do not only follow a logic of consequences or the functional preferences of their principals, but who’s communication, behavior, and institutional design is also shaped by the normative concerns of members, staff, and public.

Furthermore, the cases suggest that legitimation strategies are interdependent and that to be successful, international institutions should balance the demands of their constituencies.\textsuperscript{89} Legitimation strategies addressing one constituency may limit the set of applicable strategies towards the other constituencies and vice versa, because the underlying norms are incompatible. An institution should, for instance, not aim at legitimating itself as democratic and responsive towards the public and at the same time claim that it is an independent body of experts vis-à-vis its staff, because it is likely that both constituencies take note of these contradictions. While we do not expect all three

\textsuperscript{89} See also Seabrooke, 'Legitimacy Gaps in the World Economy: Explaining the Sources of the IMF's Legitimacy Crisis', p. 254.
constituencies to be of invariable importance to all international institutions at all times, we propose that institutions might be able to increases chances of success by balancing the legitimation demands of different constituencies as much as possible.

The analysis of legitimation strategies and their effects on institutional communication, behavior, and design builds in both cases on a systematic examination of legitimation claims and institutional changes presented in a representative set of both institutions’ public documents. The reconstruction of the G8’s reaction to its legitimacy crisis in the aftermath of the great recession analyzes G8 summit communiqués, G8 chair’s summaries, G8 final reports, and G8 media statements. It is supplemented by insights from expert interviews with the German and the British sherpa teams of 2012 and 2013, respectively. We trace the IMF’s legitimation strategies during the Asian financial crisis via its annual reports and integrate the comprehensive scholarly literature on the Fund. To gauge the results of legitimation strategies in terms of better or worse legitimacy perceptions by different constituencies, we follow the established literature on empirical legitimacy and turn to the available data on political behavior and political communication. Needless to say, it is not possible to determine, precisely

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and definitively, the degree to which the analyzed legitimation strategies have affected the perceptions of both institutions constituencies.

**The G8 after the financial meltdown in 2008**

The institutional reform of the G8 in the aftermath of the financial crash and the way it has been communicated to the public demonstrates that international institutions may respond to a threatening withdrawal of support by its member states by implementing a set of legitimation strategies. The case study shows how G8 representatives were able to balance the legitimacy demands of members and the public without creating conflict with the legitimacy concerns of its ‘borrowed’ staff, i.e. its sherpa team.

The G8’s already precarious legitimacy among its membership and the public was further undermined in the aftermath of the financial crash in 2008: not only did the public perceive the G8 to be increasingly irrelevant and unrepresentative in comparison to the G20,92 but even its members began to question the Group. Peter Mandelson, former trade minister of the United Kingdom, claimed that the ‘[e]ra of the G8 is over’93 and U.S. President Barack Obama argued that the G20 is better equipped to represent

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recent shifts within the global economy.\textsuperscript{94} Overall, the G20’s upgrade from a ministerial to a heads-of-states-process resulted in a legitimacy crisis of the G8 as regards its member states and the public, because both constituencies perceived the Group as an outdated, weak, and unrepresentative institution, or to use the words of a journalist, as the ‘wrong body, the wrong members, the wrong time’.\textsuperscript{95}

Our analysis of G8 summit declarations between 1975 and 2013 shows that the Group’s representatives were well aware of its precarious legitimacy. Not only do we observe a strong increase of legitimacy claims – explaining the Group’s normative purpose and identity – in documents since 2008, but in 2009 the G8 even replaced the rather short chair’s summaries by much longer communiqués allowing for a more nuanced response to its critics.\textsuperscript{96}

Substantively, these data suggest that the G8 implemented a set of institutional and discursive legitimation strategies to dissolve its negative image of an unrepresentative and ineffective ‘circuses without bread’\textsuperscript{97}. At the core of these strategies were two features of the G8’s institutional identity, which had receded into the background: its informality and its work to the benefit of all. In sum, the Group applied three distinct

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\textsuperscript{95} Elliot, 'If the G8 is to survive it', \textit{Guardian}, July 8 2009.
\textsuperscript{97} Gronau, Nonhoff and Nullmeier, 'Spiele ohne Brot: Die Legitimitätskrise der G8'.
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but balanced legitimation strategies which refer not only discursively but also institutionally to the broadly accepted norm of the global common good and which emphasize its capacity to effectively and credibly solve global problems.

In 2012, the G8 implemented an *intergovernmental legitimation strategy*, reviving an institutional feature which has constantly been appreciated by its members, but has faded away over time due to an ever growing political agenda and ‘too much focus on communiques as opposed to building trust between world leaders’; its informality. By stressing this institutional feature, which cannot easily be provided by other international institutions, the G8 managed to revive its members’ commitment to the club. One of the most hesitant members, the 2012 chair Barack Obama, brought the club back to its informal formula claiming that:

‘Despite changes in the global economy and the international economic architecture, the core insight that led to the first Summit remains as true as ever: when the G-8 governments agree on an issue, that agreement has enormous power to shape the world in which we live. As a result, the overarching objective of the United States in 2012 was to bring the G-8

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back to its roots in the spirit of Rambouillet: an intimate gathering of Leaders capable of taking action together on areas of common concern.¹⁰⁰

By introducing a substantive shift within the institutional structure of the G8 and presenting it as a necessary adaption to maintain the G8’s capacity acting to the benefit of all, this ‘back-to-basics’-approach reemphasized a core feature of the G8’s institutional identity which is of central importance to its member states. In 2013, Obama’s successor Gordon Brown likewise supplemented discursive legitimation by a strategy to increase institutional informality. G8 negotiations were limited to a few topics only, such as “trade, tax, transparency”, and the Group introduced an annual report to present its aims and to take stock of the latest G8 year.¹⁰¹ The new approach also translated into the reduction of negotiation participants to a minimum, a relaxed dress code inviting the leaders to put aside their ties and blazers and to roll up their sleeves, and a much more limited use of decorative materials such as G8 banners or even printed carpets, which formerly dominated the scenery.

Simultaneously, G8 chairs implemented a public legitimation strategy which aimed at highlighting a second feature of its institutional identity; its commitment to the global common good. It was hoped that the stronger emphasis on this traditional feature of the

institution’s identity would help to transform the G8’s public perception of being ‘circuses without bread’ and increase public support for a responsible, focused, and effective manager of global problems. As noted above, this discursive legitimation strategy is reflected in the replacement of short chair’s summaries by a final communiqué, a substantial increase of legitimacy claims in these documents, and the introduction of an annual report. The new formats allowed the G8 to respond in detail to current global affairs and to claim that it is a relevant and legitimate player in global governance. Since 2009, this discursive strategy has become even more explicit when the Group did no longer introduce itself as a network of states, but began to use the label of an ‘over three decades’-old institution’. A prime example of the public legitimacy strategy can be found in the communiqué of 2010:

‘What binds the G8 together is a shared vision that major global challenges must and can be addressed effectively through focus, commitment and transparency, and in partnership with other concerned members of the global community. The G8 has demonstrated the capacity to design credible approaches to meet the challenges of our times. For over thirty years, it has shown that its collective will can be a powerful catalyst for sustainable change and progress. At Muskoka in 2010, we are focusing on an effective
agenda to address key challenges in development, international peace and security, and environmental protection.\textsuperscript{102} These legitimacy claims illustrate that the public legitimation strategy was primarily intended to address criticism about the G8’s capacity to solve global problems. It was also reflected in the Group’s more narrow agenda of the subsequent summits focusing on global food security and climate change (summits of 2009 and 2012), health care and maternity (summit of 2010) and democratic empowerment in the Arab region (summit of 2011). Overall, this public legitimation strategy did not only allow the G8 to distance itself from the younger, less “like-minded”, and less experienced G20, it also helped to gain support for the more pronounced image of the G8 as an effective facilitator of the global common good.

As part of the G8’s bureaucratic legitimation strategy, staff members were still praised in public by the G8 presidencies for their efforts as this did not conflict with intergovernmental and public legitimation strategies. This practice is designed to value the work on the ground and to highlight that the G8 would not be able to fulfill its role without its staff working for the Group’s high aspirations. However, staff members did no longer receive presents from the G8 chairs such as stickers and pins with the respective G8 logo which they valued as a ‘reward for blood, sweat, and tears’.\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{103} Interview with German sherpa team, 3 July 2012.
Although we do not interpret these memorabilia as a legitimation strategy, but rather as a supportive action fostering a sense of belonging, the reduced use of such presents was well compatible with the ‘back-to-basics-approach’ in three ways: first, it underlined the new public image of a more focused institution by investing less time and money into symbolic practices, including the presentation of gifts to staff members, which formerly resulted in public criticism on the G8’s show character. Second, it complemented the reduced use of symbols at summits and, thus, helped to signal the informalization of the Group to member governments. And third, it corresponded to the sherpa teams’ demand for a rational-legal proceeding as established for their work within the respective national public services. Accordingly, the head of the British sherpa team in 2013 evaluated the gifts as ‘a nice thing to have’ that ‘shows you’ve been there (…) and you’ll remember it for years and years to come’. But ‘in times of austerity’, staff members ‘just didn’t feel it necessary, and how we could then explain that to taxpayers’.104

In sum, the G8 case shows that the concept of legitimation strategies enhances a clearer understanding of international institutions’ communication, behavior, and design. The 2008 legitimacy crisis has not only contributed to a transformation of G8 public communication, but was also a driving force of the renewed informalization and transformed agenda of the club. To soften the legitimacy crisis, the G8 came back to its

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104 Interview with Head of British G8 sherpa team, 12 December 2013.
institutional identity as an informal club fostering global development. Its traditional informality was revived and attached to a stronger focus on the global common good which can be gleaned from legitimation claims, the changing agenda subsequent to the financial crisis, and an institutional transformation towards less pomp, less participants, and less bureaucracy.

This renewed emphasis on central aspects of its institutional identity and its balanced communication to the Groups legitimation constituencies based on the broadly accepted norm of the global common good appears to have contributed to the mitigation of the legitimacy crisis in the aftermath of the financial crash. Heads of states still attend G8 summits and are satisfied that the task of freeing the G8 ‘from the baggage and bureaucracy of the past summits’ was made possible ‘by the frank, open, leader-to-leader discussion’ at the 2012 summit.\textsuperscript{105} As regards public support, our analysis of evaluations of the G8 in quality newspapers in Great Britain, the U.S., Germany, and Switzerland between 1998 and 2013 shows that after 2010 the public debate has become less intense and at the same time more supportive than during the remainder of the analyzed time period. Positive evaluations often refer to the legitimacy claims brought forward by the G8 and quite a few observers emphasize for instance that ‘being a

\textsuperscript{105} David Cameron quoted in: Wintour, 'G8 summit: Trade deal can rescue world from recession, says PM: Tie-ups sought between EU, US, Canada and Japan: First talks with Hollande after Cameron backed rival', \textit{Guardian}, May 18 2012.
location for conversation is a strong justification of international summits. Even NGOs such as Action Aid UK acknowledge the G8’s ‘potential to ignite significant global initiatives with the potential to improve dramatically the lives of the world’s poorest people’. This combination of a less intense but more positive public debate referring to the Group’s legitimacy claims suggests a positive effect of the public legitimation strategy, because this is clearly a more comfortable position than an intense and critical debate.

Finally, staff members still express their support for the G8 process – and this not only because their contribution to G8 summits is in line with their work for national public services, but because they believe in the worthiness of the G8 process:

‘So clearly we’ve worked hard, but I’m pretty sure that every single one of us did it because it was a rewarding thing to do, we used our respective expertise and knowledge and skills to deliver what we thought is a good agenda, is a good summit, which reached out to many many people.’

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106 The Times, 'The Next Summit; The results of gatherings of the G8 usually fall short of the expectations generated in advance. That does not mean they are a waste of time', The Times, June 26 2010.

107 The Times, 'G8 should seize initiative and listen to the Pope', The Times, July 10 2009.

108 Interview with Head of British G8 sherpa team, 12 December 2013.
5.1 The IMF at the center of the Asian financial crisis

We explore the IMF’s response to its legitimacy crisis in the late 1990s as an example for an institution which struggled – despite a number of legitimation strategies applied by the Fund’s management – for an extended time period with declining support from member states, staff, and the public. The example underlines first, that not only small and weakly institutionalized clubs with a coherent membership like the G8, but also strong international bureaucracies try to bolster their legitimacy in times of crisis. Second, the analysis shows that the Fund relied heavily on discursive legitimation and that these legitimation claims were not balanced enough to accommodate the conflicting demands of its constituencies of legitimation.

The case study focuses on a time, when the ‘existing critiques of the IMF’s international crisis management role were given renewed political momentum and greater urgency’.109 Today, with the help of the G20 and only after extended governance reforms, the IMF appears to have risen ‘like a phoenix’,110 but the process of recovery from the legitimacy crisis of the 1990s has stretched out over more than a decade of declining support from donor and debtor states, the public, and staff.

Subsequent to the emergence of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the IMF experienced a strong and sustained public and intergovernmental legitimacy crisis: it became the target of mass protests in debtor countries,\textsuperscript{111} NGO campaigns in creditor countries, and its legitimacy was increasingly questioned in the mass media.\textsuperscript{112} As regards its members, the IMF was criticized by debtor governments, who began to steer away from the Fund, and by donor countries, who objected to the Fund’s approach to the crisis.\textsuperscript{113} Data on the number of IMF programs in place worldwide suggest that the legitimacy beliefs of debtor countries deteriorated in the aftermath of the crisis. After decades of growth between 1970 and 1996 the amount of IMF programs declined between 1997 and 2005 to numbers lower than during the 1970s, because debtor countries deliberately avoided borrowing from the Fund.\textsuperscript{114} Similarly, the Fund’s legitimacy problems can be gleaned from the organization’s budgetary crisis during this period. While budget and staff grew substantially during the 1990s, growth came to a standstill during the years after the crisis.\textsuperscript{115} In 1998, several leading U.S. democrats even threatened to hold the U.S. quota increase, because of the Fund’s role during the crisis and because they were concerned about the negative effects of IMF’s engagement.

\textsuperscript{111} As indicated by our protest event data analysis for the period between 1996 and 2004, the IMF was the target of a series of riots in debtor countries, like South Korea, Jordan, Bulgaria, Mexico, and South Africa.

\textsuperscript{112} Our analysis of news agencies coverage on the IMF shows that public attention doubles during the crisis.


\textsuperscript{114} Nooruddin and Woo, 'Heeding the Sirens: The Politics of IMF Program Participations', \textit{Political Science Research and Methods}, Online First: (2014).

in capital account liberalization and loan conditionality on financial stability, the environment, and labor standards.\textsuperscript{116}

Overall, this legitimacy crisis was not only linked to the Fund’s role in the emergence of the Asian crisis, which critics from donor countries like the U.S. attributed to the IMF’s disorderly liberalization of capital accounts, but it also triggered criticism of the negative consequences of loan conditionality for employment, poverty, and social stability. In addition, the Fund has been criticize for its democratic deficit and its limited respect for environmental issues and human rights in debtor countries.\textsuperscript{117}

As a result, the IMF experienced a loss of relevancy from which it was able to recover only a decade later. We claim that this decade of irrelevancy is partly the result of a set of legitimation strategies, which relied heavily on discursive legitimation but relatively little on substantive change and which was not able to balance the conflicting demands of the Fund’s constituencies.

To reconstruct the Fund’s reaction to this complex situation, we draw on an analysis of legitimacy claims published in IMF annual reports between 1980 and 2011 and the extensive literature discussing the Fund’s legitimacy crisis and transformation during the 1990’s and early 2000’s. Our data show that the Fund’s management was


\textsuperscript{117} Joyce, ‘The IMF and Global Financial Crises: A Phoenix Rising?’ p. 119; O’Brien, Goetz, Scholte and Williams, ‘Contesting Global Governance: Multilateral Economic Institutions and Global Social Movements’, Ch. 5.
aware of its precarious legitimacy. The share of statements which refer to the institution’s identity and normative purpose grew to an absolute maximum during the late 1990s. Substantively, these data suggest that the IMF implemented a set of mainly discursive legitimation strategies to address the overlapping legitimacy concerns of member governments and the wider public. At the core of these strategies were the norms democratic participation, representation, transparency and social security, which had so far only played a marginal role in the Fund’s institutional identity.

To restore the confidence of emerging market economies and to address the concerns of social movements from debtor and creditor countries, the Fund employed a discursive legitimation strategy, which mainly addressed its alleged democratic deficit and limited attention to social security. While the language of transparency, accountability, and democratic participation was alien to the Fund of earlier times, our data show that this type of legitimacy claim became much more frequent since 1997 and even dominated the Fund’s rhetoric in 1998.

Similarly, the IMF’s management proposed institutional reforms tailored to democratize the institution and to include some explicit attention to social and environmental issues. Addressing concerns about the Fund’s transparency and accountability mainly uttered by creditor governments, the IMF management created
the Independent Evaluation Office\textsuperscript{118} in 2001 which was mandated to ‘[e]nhance the learning culture within the Fund, [s]trengthen the Fund’s external credibility, [p]romote greater understanding of the work of the Fund, and [s]upport institutional governance and oversight’.\textsuperscript{119} As regards demands from civil society and debtor governments, the management proposed to restructure quotas and voting rights to address the criticism of unfair procedures and to give more voice to developing countries in the formal decision making process.\textsuperscript{120} On the project level more deliberative structures were designed to make debtor countries experience more ownership of reform programs and to give more room for social aspects\textsuperscript{121} because IMF officials had realized that ‘a broad-based social consensus is needed to sustain an IMF programme’.\textsuperscript{122}

As regards public legitimacy, the IMF began to reach out to civil society in borrowing countries\textsuperscript{123} and to provide more public information\textsuperscript{124} via ‘new communication vehicle[s]’ such as the Chairman’s Statement, the circulation of a ‘Code of Conduct for Executive Directors’ on ethical standards, the re-opening of its Visitor’s Center, providing a more informative website, and opening up its archives to the

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\item[120] Seabrooke, ‘Legitimacy Gaps in the World Economy: Explaining the Sources of the IMF’s Legitimacy Crisis’, p. 262.
\item[122] Interview with IMF executive director as quoted in O’Brien, Goetz, Scholte and Williams, ‘Contesting Global Governance: Multilateral Economic Institutions and Global Social Movements’, p. 187.
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By combining this set of discursive and institutional legitimation strategies, the management aimed ‘to persuade the population that an adjustment package is legitimate’. These public legitimation strategies aimed at creating the image of an open and responsive institution, which had learnt its lessons and would more strongly take into account the human costs involved during adjustment or transition to a market economy, rather than pure economic reason. To use the more recent words of IMF’s former Managing Director Dominique Strauss-Kahn: ‘These reforms [i.e. quota and governance reforms] will help build a more relevant, a more legitimate and truly representative IMF, and – above all – a more effective IMF.’

Clearly, this approach was not compatible with IMF’s staff. When the Asian crisis hit, the Fund’s staff was composed of economists who, as a result of their professional training, saw economic liberalization, international trade, and the promotion of economic growth as the legitimate purpose of the Fund. From their perspective, the IMF’s public legitimation strategies targeted on poverty reduction, social security, and democratic participation stood in stark conflict with the Fund’s identity and purpose, because they constituted an inappropriate expansion of the IMF’s economic mandate towards more political issues and because these new goals would hinder liberalization

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and economic growth. Moreover, IMF staff was not trained to work in these areas and lacked clear guidance. Together with the immense workload in response to the Asian crisis, the stretching of the mandate resulted in overworked and disenchanted staff.\footnote{IMF, ‘Annual Report 1999’, p. 119.}

While the Executive Board reacted to workload issues by founding a ‘Working Group on Stress’ and providing the staff with more information on how to deal with stress,\footnote{IMF, ‘Annual Report 2001’, p. 81.} it failed to address the legitimacy concerns raised by staff members, namely the widening of the Fund’s activities beyond its mandate.\footnote{This reaction exemplifies our distinction between legitimation strategies and other activities tailored to create less durable specific support. In essence, the reduction of stress addressed individual cost-benefit calculations but ignored normative concerns of staff members.}

Although the Human Resource Department had asked for clarification and a ‘more clear definition of the work of the institution as a whole’\footnote{IMF, ‘Annual Report 2000’, p. 96.} in the context of the Fund’s intergovernmental and public legitimation strategies, IMF management did not address the inconsistencies perceived by their staff members.

Individually, both public and intergovernmental legitimation strategies promised to mitigate the sources of the legitimacy crisis. However, they could not balance the demands of the Fund’s constituencies for two reasons: first, a cacophony between the IMF’s intergovernmental and public legitimation was perceived by members and the public, because the announced ownership for borrowing countries was violated by the Fund’s engagement with the civil society.
of debtor countries, so that they would pressure their governments into compliance with IMF conditionality: ‘The Fund’s member states join on the principle of sovereign non-interference, so the notion that citizens should receive information to pressurize their governments to adopt Fund policies is a violation of principles of rightful membership and rightful conduct.’\(^{133}\) Consequently, the intergovernmental strategy to create the image of a more representative, fair, and less interfering institution fizzled, because it was undermined by the sovereignty challenging approach to win over the public of borrowing countries.\(^{134}\)

Second, public legitimation strategies stood in conflict with the staff’s institutional identity, because democratization, engagement with civil society, and the inclusion of social and environmental issues into loan conditionality did not only stretch beyond the IMF’s mandate but were also perceived to jeopardize the Fund’s economic governance targets of liberalization, free trade, and economic growth.\(^{135}\) The new image of a democratically representative Fund taking care of social security and the environment violated staff member’s belief in rightful conduct. As a result, much of the Fund’s public and intergovernmental strategies remained mere rhetoric and many of the above

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\(^{134}\) This was even acknowledged by the Fund in: IMF, *The IMF and Civil Society Organizations: Striking a Balance* (Washington D.C.: IMF, 2001).

discussed institutional reform proposals were not or only weakly implemented.\textsuperscript{136} As the Director of the Fiscal Affairs Department acknowledged, the Fund’s work on poverty reduction remained ‘very limited’ and ‘not a main or explicit objective of the IMF’. Even more tellingly, he suggested that the purpose of safety nets had ‘much to do with strengthening the political sustainability of reform’.\textsuperscript{137} Similarly, democratic rhetoric on the principle of ownership has not always been translated into substantially different behavior. Especially in the context of formulating and implementing Fund-sponsored policies, many staff members have interpreted ownership as the acceptance by debtor governments and their citizens of Fund prescriptions instead of real participation.\textsuperscript{138}

In sum, the Fund’s reaction to the legitimacy crisis illustrates first, that even established international bureaucracies are aware of the legitimacy demands of their constituencies and that at least the Fund’s management was willing to address these demands through discursive and institutional adaptation. Second, the case shows that legitimation strategies need careful coordination to be successful. As an external evaluation committee put it as regards to ownership: ‘it has been difficult, for reasons of domestic political considerations and the deadweight of tradition and habit in development cooperation offices in the Fund […] to reconcile the declared intentions

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136 & O’Brien, Goetz, Scholte and Williams, ‘Contesting Global Governance: Multilateral Economic Institutions and Global Social Movements’, Ch. 5.
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with practice’. Consequently, concerns of debtor governments and the public could not be eliminated for a long time and Fund members stopped borrowing from the IMF, sought alternative regional arrangements for their financial needs, or publicly stated their intention to avoid future Fund borrowing. Public protests against IMF annual meetings did not decline during the 2000s and demands for IMF reform from civil society groups were still uttered frequently.

6 Conclusion

The cases of the G8 and the IMF demonstrate that very different international institutions – ranging from informal clubs to strongly institutionalized bureaucracies – are united in a quest for legitimacy. To pave the way for a systematic empirical analysis of the causes and consequences of these top-down attempts to shape the legitimacy perceptions of different constituencies, this article develops the concept of legitimation strategies, defines its boundaries and delimits three relevant constituencies of legitimation: member states, bureaucratic staff, and the wider public. Following Weber’s empirical understanding of legitimacy and its ascription or withdrawal, we

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suggest to understand legitimation strategies as goal-oriented activities employed to establish and maintain a reliable basis of diffuse support for a political regime by its constituencies. Our core argument is that international institutions apply different sets of legitimation strategies – ranging from mere rhetoric to substantive institutional adaptation – according to the targeted constituency.

Three main lessons can be drawn from the application of our concept: first, the fact that international institutions engage in legitimation strategies has important implications for research on their autonomy and behavior. Although the mainstream IR-literature assumes legitimacy to be a central resource of international institutions necessary to engage in activities deviating from their member states’ preferences or to achieve governance targets, international institutions’ strategic attempts to shape the legitimacy perceptions of different constituencies have so far received little attention. This contribution hopes to provide a first conceptual remedy and advance more specific and systematic empirical research on the question of how international institutions’ quest for legitimacy transforms their behavior and to what extent successful legitimation strategies can increase their autonomy vis-à-vis their member states.

Second, by taking into account all three types of legitimation strategies and their interaction, research on the legitimacy of international institutions is better equipped to

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understand how international institutions manage to position themselves as politically relevant and legitimate parts of international politics. This paper proposes that a carefully balanced set of international institutions’ legitimation strategies might one condition for success. Our case studies suggest that international institutions may be more successful in managing their legitimacy if they balance the normative expectations of their member states, staff, and the public. In addition to this condition, the interaction between legitimation strategies and attributes of international institutions, such as types of authority, modes of governance, membership, and mandate, can be expected to shape the success or failure of legitimation strategies and should be investigated.

Finally, the concept can make a substantial contribution to research on international institutions’ design, because their institutional set-up is not only shaped by functional demand in terms of the respective mandate but also by the quest for legitimacy in the eyes of different constituencies. To better understand why some international institutions assume an informal club format, while others become full blown organizations, why some institutions’ decision-making procedures are reformed substantially, while others’ remain unaltered, or why some institutions open-up to civil society, while others do not, the interaction of international institutions’ constituencies of legitimation and legitimation strategies should be taken into account more systematically. Our case studies show that international institutions react to crises of legitimacy by – among other things – adapting their institutional design to the
legitimacy demands of different constituencies. Thus, our concept might enrich ongoing research on the normative roots of institutional change of international institutions by specifying mechanisms and pointing out likely periods of change.\textsuperscript{144}

In conclusion, research on international institutions’ varying levels of legitimacy, autonomy and behavior, and institutional design will profit from exploring ‘varieties of legitimation’,\textsuperscript{145} i.e. how international institutions prioritize constituencies of legitimation and what types of strategies which types of international institutions adopt to appeal to their audiences.

\textsuperscript{144} Seabrooke, ‘Everday Legitimacy and institutional Change’, in A. Gofas and C. Hay (eds.) \textit{The Role of Ideas in Political Analysis} (London: Routledge, 2010); Tallberg, Sommerer, Squatrito and Jönsson, ‘The Opening Up of International Organizations’.

\textsuperscript{145} Nullmeier, Geis and Daase, ‘Der Aufstieg der Legitimationspolitik: Rechtfertigung und Kritik politischer-ökonomischer Ordnungen’, p. 29.