Decision making within international organisations. Problems, opportunities, prospects

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1. Introduction

This paper's explicit objective is to promote debate within the workshop with the aim of discovering elements of concurrence and division among the contributions to this workshop. The underlying goal is to present some ideas that may increase coherence between the various contributions. This could help probing the possibility of future collaboration between workshop participants, which is one of the points on the agenda of the workshop. These objectives can best be reached, I believe, by, first, thinking through several major problems of past research into the subject of decision making within international organisations; and, next, suggesting possible solutions to these problems. In particular, the paper focuses on obstacles to developing generalised knowledge on decision making within international organisations. Its basic claims are the following. First, the study of international regimes and global governance, although meant to overcome the disadvantages of studying formal international organisations, hinders a renewed focus on what is happening in international organisations. Second, the subject suffers from an emphasis on single case studies. Third, the subject suffers from an exclusive focus on only a few theoretical approaches, notably the debate between rationalist realism and social constructivism.

As a remedy for these three weaknesses, this paper suggests four solutions, respectively. First, renewed attention to formal international organisations is needed. It is argued that a principal-agent approach offers a fruitful inroad. Second, increased precision on the dependent variable is necessary. This paper maintains that we should focus on explaining the nature and timing of (non) decisions within the framework of international organisations. Third, we should build comparative analytical frameworks that make use of previous single case studies. Fourth, more attention should be devoted to the application of so-called middle range theories, many of which flourish in the area of foreign policy analysis.

2. Three weaknesses

#1: The focus on international regimes and global governance

The first problem is that the discipline of International Relations currently focuses on concepts such as international, or global, governance and international regime\(^2\). Both concepts share, and find their value in, the idea that students of international co-operation and conflict should no longer focus exclusively on formal international organisations. As a matter of fact, research into international organisations well into the 1970s had focused on descriptive

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\(^2\) Strictly speaking, the concept of international regime is beginning to be substituted for by international governance. Not surprisingly, Susan Strange, among the first to note the new hype on governance, explained this retreat of regime theory by its redundancy as an element of American hegemony. She maintained that regime theory's focus on stability and compromise served American hegemony in the world political economy (Strange 1995).
questions like 'What do International Organisations do?' 'How are they organised?' 'What are the voting patterns inside the General Assembly?' etc. The study of international organisations was the hunting ground of many international lawyers, some diplomatic historians, and those political scientists who projected their idea of national politics onto the 'parliaments' of international organisations. The common idea, however, was that international organisations did not matter to world politics.3

The 1970s witnessed the arrival of pluralism to the study of international relations. Pluralism identified international organisations as one of those actors (next to, e.g., multinational corporations) that could have a major impact on world politics, depending on the circumstances. Those circumstances could be traced by identifying the international regime pertaining to a specific international policy area. Thus, regime theory was developed originally as a possibility to move away from analysing formal international organisations in a fruitless way by demanding explicit attention to their role in determining the contents and impact of a specific international regime. When, however, regime theory was fully developed during the 1980s, the intended focus on relevant non-state actors in world politics was abandoned in favour of a renewed attention to states that decide on the creation of, and obedience to, international regimes. The major exception was the literature on so-called epistemic communities. The consequence was an increased neglect of the role of international organisations.

The literature on global governance has not improved this situation. Most of the studies appearing under this heading seem to find inspiration in the perceived threat of transnational problems that require a collaborative effort of all actors, both domestic and transnational. International organisations figure prominently in these analyses as vehicles for consciousness-raising, education, change, and monitoring. Although international organisations are given their own specific role, most studies seem to assume that international organisations are the malleable and effective instruments of actors with noble intentions. They thus neglect that international organisations can be a battleground between conflicting interests, but also independent actors in their own right with their own goals and strategies. By consequence, the global governance literature hardly pays attention to decision making within international organisations (cf. Murphy 2000).

Only one area of study seems to defy this pessimistic account: European Union studies. The enormous pile of literature on the subject, from the angle of so many (sub)disciplines, seems to show that the study of at least one formal international organisation seems alive and kicking. At the same time, progress in the study of the EU has recently inspired IR theorists to reconsider the role of formal rules in international policy making, including the role of certain international judiciary bodies. On the one hand, it cannot be denied that analyses of EU decision making have been very fruitful, especially those adopting a neo-institutional perspective, for instance, with a focus on formal and informal decision rules, joint decision traps, etc.. On the other hand, as I will maintain below, many aspects of EU decision making have remained unexplored, for a variety of reasons.

#2 The debate between rationalist and social constructivist approaches to IR hinders progress in empirical research

3 See, for an overview of these studies Martin and Simmons 1998: 733-734.

4 See, for an extensive analysis, Verbeek 1998.

5 See, especially, the special issue of International Organization on 'Legalization and World Politics', (54), 3, 2000.
Theoretically, the discipline's focus on international regimes and global governance has recently been dominated by the conflicting views of rationalists and constructivists on international relations. Indeed, the issue celebrating 50 years of *International Organization* has declared the rationalist-constructivist divide to be the major debate currently raging in the discipline. Several papers in our workshop touch upon the discussion between these contrasting perspectives. I prefer not to go into the ontological and epistemological elements that are part of the rationalist-constructivist debate. Here, I just want to stress that in my opinion the debate risks causing an unfortunate separation of skills among members of the discipline. This evidently will have a bearing on the study of international organisations.

Basically, rationalists (which dominate the realist and much of the neoliberal camp) tend to promote a picture of world politics as a domain dominated by interstate rivalry but in which long-term co-operation is a possibility. Neorealists are more pessimistic on co-operation than neoliberals. This difference is rooted in different assumptions regarding the character of international anarchy and its implications for co-operation or defection. Both, however, deny the possibility that (formal) international organisations carry weight in such situations. Constructivists, criticise rationalists for taking states' interests for granted and ignoring the role non-state actors can play in the formation of those interests. Constructivists thus allow for the inclusion of international organisations into their analyses. Yet, many constructivists seem not that much interested explaining specific behaviour and outcomes. Of course, rationalists are, almost per definition, interested in explanation, and in explaining specific patterns of behaviour.

I propose to take a pragmatic position in this debate. First, we need to explain specific behaviour. Second, we should not ignore the problem of preference formation. Third, we should acknowledge the importance of studying decision making in international organisations, especially the conditions under which international organisations affect certain international behaviour and the extent to which they are needed to explain states' preferences.

Within that framework I think we should never loose sight of the point of departure that decision making in international organisations cannot be studies without due attention to interstate rivalry. At the same time, we should never jump to Mearsheimer's conclusion that international organisations do not matter. I suggest in section 3 below that adopting the so-called principal-agent perspective allows us to follow a statist perspective that takes decision making within international organisations seriously and which allows for analysing specific features constructivists are interested in, such as preference formation.

# 3: Too many single case studies

A third weakness of the study of decision making within international organisations is the dominance of the single case study as the dominant research strategy, at least outside the European Union domain. *Large n* studies of IO decision making usually come in form of analysing voting patterns in the General Assembly of UN organisations or in the UN Security Council, which were very popular in the 1960s and 1970s and still are conducted today (cf. footnote 2). Yet, these studies hardly dealt with the question whether that involved significant decision making, that is which affected (a domain of) international relations. Few studies exist

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7 The most radical position is defended by neorealist John Mearsheimer (1994).
8 Within that framework I take the position that the impact of non-state actors can be studied from a rationalist as well as from a constructivist perspective, depending on the research question one is interested in. I realize that this may not accommodate the position of all streams within constructivism (see for an extensive argument, Verbeek 2000).
that apply a common framework of research questions and variables to a set of single cases. The best example to date still is Cox and Jacobson's seminal study *The Anatomy of Influence* (Cox and Jacobson 1973), which provided comparable analyses of ILO, ITU, IMF UNESCO, WHO, and IAEA. Another would be the volume edited by Reinalda and Verbeek (1998). Its case studies all deal with the question whether and why IOs' decisions could be characterised as inexplicable by realist predictions based on the interests of the most powerful member states. This approach comes close to Eckstein's (1975) case study strategy of most and least likely 'crucial cases'. However, it remains curious how few case studies of IO decision making is framed in these terms, indeed, how few studies are conducted with an explicit theoretical interest in the first place. This is even true for the debate on politicisation of international organisations that raged in the 1970s and 1980s. Even the popular hypothesis that technical international organisations the least likely to suffer from politicisation was never comprehensively tested.

Some important exceptions to the unpopularity of theory are, first, the constructivist work on preference formation (see Barnett and Finnemore 1999). Second, Ernst Haas's application of notions of change from organizational theory to international organisations such as WHO and UNEP (E. Haas, 1990). Third, studies of, what is now labelled the legalisation of international co-operation, such as the trade panels in NAFTA and WTO.

Of course, in principle, international regime theory would have been the obvious framework within which to study decision making within international organisations. It would have allowed testing the various approaches to international regimes (hegemonic leadership, rational choice, functionalism and the 'cognitive approach') against comparable case studies involving an international organisation's involvement. Yet, apart from the epistemic communities' literature (e.g., P. Haas 1990), few such studies exist.9

The situation is less dramatic in European Union research. Large n quantitative studies of EU decision making are no exception, such as the application of Bueno de Mesquita's conflict model and Stokman's exchange model both to decision making in the Council of Ministers (Bueno de Mesquita and Stokman 1995) and to implementation of EU legislation (e.g., Paine 1999). At the same time, we witness the growth of the number of studies adopting a comparative case study design. This is especially true for studies adopting a neo-institutionalist emphasis on the 'filtering' effect of formal and informal rules guiding decision making and implementation (e.g. Haverland 1999). This difference between EU studies and research into other intergovernmental organisations can easily be explained. The success of the EU has mobilised scholars from all subdisciplines of political science, public administration, policy analysis and international relations, whereas international organisations roughly have remained the domain of IR scholars, international lawyers and historians.

3. A solution to these problems: Adopt the agent-principal construct

Regime and governance theory has, on the whole, neglected the role of international organisations. However, renewed attention to formal IOs means running two risks: first, the rationalist realist's pitfall of the insignificance of international organisations. Second, the constructivist pitfall of disregarding outcomes, that is, decisions. Yet, at the same time we know that the relationship between IOs and their member states is always luring in the back of anything that is going on in an international organisation. I suggest that adopting an agent-principal agent framework will allow us to keep this 'deep structure' in mind while avoiding the immediate suggestion that member states determine decision making within an

9 An exception would be Christer Jonsson's study of IATA's and ICAO's role in determining the international aviation regime in the 1980s (Jonsson 1986)
international organisation. This implies that we first have to deal with the question whether decisions within an international organisation can ever differ from the interests of the most important and powerful member states, that is whether an international organisation can have policy autonomy.

In order to know an international organisation’s autonomy one first needs to assess whether the structural conditions under which an international organisation operates, that is, an anarchical system dominated by self-interested states, make policy freedom possible at all. After all, as we have seen in the previous section, most mainstream international relations scholars hold a skeptical view on the matter. This section will show that the main face value argument in favor of the possibility of room for maneuver for an international organisation, can be found in the consequences of characterizing the relationship between an international organisation and its member states as a principal-agent relationship. Principal-agent analysis aims at analyzing the relationship between an actor (the principal) who delegates, but does not surrender, authority to a certain body (the agent), specifically designed to perform certain tasks. Its main focus is on the battle between the principal, who wants an agent to do what he asked him to do, and the agent, who tries to carve out as much leeway as possible to do things he wants to do himself. Principal-agent analysis seeks to explain the precise nature of a principal's control and an agent's freedom as well as to design strategies of control.\(^\text{10}\)

Why is it relevant to conceive of international organisations as agents and of their member states as principals? One main disadvantage of living in an anarchical international political system is the opportunistic behavior of other states. States will therefore have a preference to minimize such opportunism. One solution is to set up so-called structures of governance. International organisations are part of these structures of governance, which may also comprise international norms, values, or communication channels\(^\text{11}\). Essentially, governance structures create a degree of hierarchy within an anarchical system. They reduce transaction costs and make it more difficult for states to cheat\(^\text{12}\). Even from a strict neo-realist perspective, states may have an interest in setting up international organisations, as long as the latter will serve the states’ objectives. From a neo-realist position, however, a state would not accept that avoiding opportunistic behavior of other states would require it to adhere to the governance structure itself all the time. Institutionalists and neo-realists therefore differ on their assessment of the short-term and long term attitude of states \textit{vis a vis} structures of governance. Yet, they do not in principle differ on the possibility that states create structures of governance to further their interests. The main issue rather is to what extent states succeed in keeping control of the structures they create. Principal-agent theory investigates exactly that matter.

Whether states create governance structures depends on the costs of governance. Lake argues that three types of costs occur. First, monitoring and control requires the allocation of resources. Second, to make states abide with governance rules, other states may have to offer them side payments. Third, powerful states may consider governance structures an incentive to cheat, as it increases the probability that other states will obey the rules\(^\text{13}\). In Lake’s theory of state choice to international organisations, international organisations are created by states as components of such governance structures. An international organisation is expected to lower transaction costs for various reasons. Some of these pertain to the advantages international organisations offer member states in their international relations. First, they monitor state compliance with international obligations. Second, they solve problems that are

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\(^{10}\) See, for a general introduction to the application of principal-agent analysis to problems in political science, Bendor 1990, 383-398; Bendor, Taylor, and Van Gaalen 1987.

\(^{11}\) Lake 1996, 14.

\(^{12}\) Lake 1996, 10.

\(^{13}\) Lake 1996, 15.
too much time consuming or too complex to deal with efficiently on a bilateral interstate basis. Third, they implement regulations that clearly require genuinely independent regulators (which a state itself often cannot be)\textsuperscript{14}. International organisations also may be to their member states' advantage because they serve the domestic political position of member states' governments. For instance, governments may use international organisations to transfer funds to specific interest groups which would not have been approved domestically had the funds been channeled to them through national procedures. International organisations thus handle the 'dirty work' for national governments.\textsuperscript{15} Once an international organisation has been created, the battle for control between principal and agent begins. The next question must then be under what circumstances an international organisation can forge an independent role for itself.

When states create international organisations as components of a governance structure, they delegate authority in certain areas to them. They have now engaged in a principal-agent relationship, in which member states are the principals that delegate authority to the international organisation, the agent. The main analytical problem in principal-agent analysis is to determine and explain the agent's leeway. Although formally a principal can withdraw the delegated authority, principal-agent analysis suggests that this is an insufficient deterrent to stop an agent from creating freedom of maneuver. This runs against the (neo-)realist argument that international organisations merely are the marionettes of their (most powerful) member states because, in the end, the latter pull the financial strings\textsuperscript{16}. Principal-agent analysis suggests that an agent's freedom of maneuver originates mainly from an asymmetrical distribution of information favoring the agent. This asymmetry then produces two types of leeway, "shirking", or "bureaucratic drift", and "slippage". The former points to agents pursuing interests of their own. The latter refers to incentives that may follow from they specific manner in which a principal structures the delegation of tasks to the agent\textsuperscript{17}.

In order to curb the potential for agent's freedom, principals develop various oversight procedures or construct situations in which one agent is set against the other, expecting them to check each other. Oversight procedures and their enforcement, however, involve additional costs to principals. Their application is dependent on a cost-benefit analysis by the principal\textsuperscript{18}.

Scholars differ about the freedom an agent-principal relationship allows. Some argue that an agent's independence is more apparent than real because of oversight procedures and because agents will anticipate the principal's preferences and thus will seldom propose actions that will not gain a majority\textsuperscript{19}. Others argue, however, that several conditions weaken these checks on agents: if an agent-principal relationship is characterized by the presence of many principals, an agent may exploit differences between them. This possibility is enlarged if the decision rules governing principals' decisions allows them to exploit them (e.g., if unanimity between principals is required, an agent needs a coalition with one principal only). Thirdly, if no agreement between principals is reached, the status quo may well be to the advantage of the agent\textsuperscript{20}.

International organisations and member states are thus caught in an agent-principal relationship. For at least three reasons this characterization is very useful if we want investigate decision making within an international organisation. First of all, it allows us to start with a rather simple situation, that is, whether and how member states succeed in checking the organisations they create. Second, it gives us hints as to what may drive

\textsuperscript{14} Pollack 1997, 103-105. \\
\textsuperscript{16} Mearsheimer 1994. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Pollack 1997, 108-109. \\
\textsuperscript{18} Pollack 1997, 111. \\
\textsuperscript{19} E.g., Bendor et al 1987, 888. Pollack 1997, 108-111 \\
\textsuperscript{20} Pollack, 1997: 111-112
international organisations to seek freedom of maneuver. Agent-principal analysis suggests that agents seek expansion of their missions or budgets, or pursue a mix of these two motives. On the other hand, the concrete objectives of agents may be hard to derive from such axiomatic motives. Indeed, this may be point where constructivist approaches should be welcomed. Thirdly, agent-principal analysis provides us with a first clue as to the sources of influence available to (organisational units within) international organisations and their member states, such as asymmetrical distribution of information and the power of the purse. Although the power of the purse may always be a threat, member states will be reluctant to apply this weapon. It would deprive them of a governance structure that lowered their transaction costs. This is what the United States experienced when it left ILO in 1979. The costs of leaving appeared much higher than its benefits. At the same time, applying these notions to decision making within an international organisation's will require us to expand the agent-principal framework. First of all, the typical relationship between international organisations and their member state is one between one agent and many, rather than one, principal. Second, international organisations may have many more sources of influence rather than information advantages alone. Third, in the real world the relationship between an international organisation and its member states is even more complicated because of the presence of many more interested actors, both at the transnational and at the (sub-)national level. The behavior of such actors may shed new light on the agent-principal relationship between an international organisation and its member states.

The principal-agent framework is often identified with a rational choice approach to the social sciences (cf. Barnett and Finnemore 1999). That is no automatism, I believe. The most important point is that a principal-agent framework should serve as a starting point. The point of departure in the study of decision making within international organisations is an IO's structural feature as an instrument of its member states. This structural element should be dealt with without falling into the neorealist trap of denying the possibility that what goes on within international organisations can have little impact on international relations. A principal-agent offers precisely that possibility. After we have identified an IO's distinct room for maneuver, it will be possible to deal with all kinds of issues (see sections 3.3 and 4) which can be approached from many theoretical angles, including rational choice and constructivism.

4 A research agenda

4.1 Principal-agent analysis as a point of departure

All in all, agent-principal analysis suggests that the (neo-)realist position that the strings of international organisations are pulled by the powerful member states still needs to be demonstrated. The character of the relationship between international organisations and their memberships suggests that freedom of maneuver is a possibility. This requires us, first of all, to investigate the interests of both states and international organisations, and, next, to assess their sources of influence, in order to determine whether asymmetries, such as in information, lead to an agent's freedom indeed. The existing empirical evidence on the power of the purse is mixed. Even though Susan Strange wondered 'why international organisations never die',

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21 Bendor et al. 1987, 875 ff.
23 Cf. Pollack 1997, 112
(Strange 1998) it has been demonstrated that international organisations are mortal after all. A
analysis of the mortality rate of international organisations between 1865 and 1985 showed
that international organisations disappear only infrequently, but are dissolved especially after
the distribution of power in the international system has changed (Cupitt et al 1996). This
suggests that on the whole principals continue to find use in the agents they created, but that
there is a borderline which is related to the distribution of power. This suggests IOs should be
careful not to exploit their freedom of maneuver so far that the fundamental interests of the
major states are threatened. Of course, the lack of legitimacy of the UN Security Council,
perceived by underrepresented states such as Germany, Japan, and other, is an example of
how changes in the balance of power in the international system is likely to affect the agent-
principal relationship.

Future research should thus be directed to determining the specific freedom of
maneuver for international organisations. Next, we should try to explain variation in such
freedom across comparable international organisations. Principal-agent analysis suggests that
such variation should easily be explained by the specific mix of three variables: the principal's
power of the purse, the information advantage of the agent and the number of principals an
agent has to deal with. This demands an analysis of those IOs that are dominated by technical
issues juxtaposed to IOs that deal with general characteristics. The epistemic community
literature suggests that technical expertise does give an international organisation leeway in
formulating international policies, such as in the case of the environmental regime for the
Mediterranean. The power of the purse argument requires a more in depth analysis of attempts
by principals to change an IOs policy by threatening to withhold financial (and other types of)
contributions. Much publicity is traditionally given to American attempts to change
organisations like ILO, UNESCO and the UN in general. The current evidence, however,
suggests the UN has solved part of its financial problems by a reduction of the costs of
peacekeeping operations (which are carried out increasingly by regional rather than UN
organisations), while reform of its bureaucracy has not been in compliance with American
demands (McDarmott, 2000). American withdrawal from ILO has not resulted in a
significant change of policies either. The relative lack of success of the weapon of the power
of the purse may well be related to the third variable: the number of principals. Most IOs have
to face over 100 principals. Given the mix of principals’ interests it is very difficult to act as a
united front of principals. Similar phenomena occur in the EU's co-operation procedure. In the
second round, unanimity in the Council of Ministers is required if the European Parliament
insists on its ‘first round amendments’. The European Commission and European Parliament
then need the support of only one member state in the Council of Ministers (one principal) to
win the day.

4.2 Aim at explaining the timing and nature of decisions and nondecisions

Once we have established the deep structure underlying decision making in international
 organisations, we should be more explicit about what we would like to know of decision
making within international organisations. In general, the literature is characterised by an,
often implicit, choice for specific decisions as the dependent variable. Most of these decisions
take the form of resolutions or package deals adopted by specific decision making bodies,
such as General Assemblies or the EU’s Council of Ministers. Some of these decisions take
the form of the outcomes of special conferences, such the 1999 The Hague Climate
Conference, which are often sponsored by international organisations. Indeed, as Bob

24 Of course, paradoxically the reduction of the American contribution percentage has decreased America's
power to unilaterally change UN's policies.
Reinalda has pointed out in his paper, many an international organisation's decision takes shape as a conference resolution or agreement.

At first sight, this seems a logical choice. Such decisions reveal the real or unreal conflict of interests between agent and principals and thus enable us to select cases that are inherently interesting, because they deal with decisions 'that matter'. It does make it possible to defend oneself against charges that studying an IO's decision reveals no relevant knowledge, as they usually are of no consequence. Nevertheless, students of international organisation decision making should be more aware of the pros and cons of this choice. The choice for a 'real decision' as the dependent variable risks the neglect of the familiar lessons of policy analysis.

First, we should be aware of agendasetting, timing and non decisions. It is as important to analyse what is not included on the IO's agenda as what is. Many studies of IO decision making still take the final decision as the obvious outcome. An explicit attention to agenda setting will undoubtedly point to the role of NGOs and the (inter)national media and the interaction between on the one hand them and on the other hand agents as well as principals in determining the actual agenda. This is not only true for the IOs in the UN system, but also for the EU. We basically still have little knowledge of the agendasetting process within the European Commission who has the exclusive right to initiate legislation. We may guess that this still involves a principal-agent framework, as the European Commission in practice has to agree on an agenda with the coming President of the Council. The alternation of Presidents every 6 months suggests, however, that the Commission will eventually find a President that is more keen on listening to Commission private policy agenda.

This brings us to the question of timing, which of course is narrowly connected to agendasetting. Analysis of IO decision making should be more directed to explaining the specific timing of agendas. Why are certain issues raised and accepted now and not earlier or later? Some, of course, may simply be related to changes in member states interests. For instance, when, in the 1980s, service industries emerged as the most profitable future markets, it was only to be expected that developed countries wanted service to be included into the GATT arrangements that were about to be discussed in the so-called Uruguay round. Other issues are much more related to the capacity of actors to form transnational coalitions. Although the environment has been on the world's agenda since early 1970s, much variation can be observed in the timing of including specific issues in an IO's agenda. This is related to variation in the capacity of NGOs and IOs to build coalitions. In the European Union much timing is related to the domestic politics of those member states to which a specific issue is highly salient. Indeed, much EU legislation is directly linked to the electoral calendars, even the regional ones, of its principal member states (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom).

Finally, students of IO decision making should be better aware of which actors are (not) involved in the decision making process and why (not). This requires us also to be better aware of what I would call the important question of who benefits and who loses, both internationally and domestically.

4.3 Make use of so-called middle range theories

The suggestions of section 4.2 involve one big risk, that is, not to look at the internal dynamics of the international organisation. Analysing decisions in a principal-agent framework almost automatically portrays the research subject as a decision that is reached by states, IOs and possibly some NGOs. It accepts the interests of the international organisation

This, of course, implies a Lasswellian perspective on politics as a conflict over the distribution of material and immaterial goods.
as given and suggests that an international organisation pursues these objectives at any time in a rational fashion. It downplays the problem that the interest of an IO may not be as obvious as it seems. Several so-called middle range theories, which often are employed in the subdiscipline of foreign policy analysis, may help us avoid this trap.

(i) **Bureaucratic politics**

The best way to start this discussion is by looking at the bureaucratic politics literature\(^26\). Consistent with the principal-agent literature, a simple bureaucratic politics model would predict that an agent, in our case an international organisation, will maximise its tasks, budget and personnel. This implies that the position taken by an international organisation regarding a specific issue will be guided by this concern. The bureaucratic politics approach has only seldom been applied to international organisations. The scant evidence suggests that this model may apply whenever the survival of an IO is perceived to be at stake. In the 1970s the FAO felt threatened by the effectiveness and efficiency of the World Food Programme and managed to push through internal reforms and to change its task description (Weiss and Jordan 1976). This rational behaviour of IOs could of course be used to explain the bureaucratic conflicts within an IO in order to explain the position an IO takes on a certain issue. Yet, surprisingly little research exists explaining the internal dynamics of an IO from a bureaucratic politics position. Even EU studies have tended to neglect this inroad into analysing the European policymaking process. There is some evidence of rivalry between Directorates General of the Commission, such as in the case of drafting the by now infamous Banana Directive of 1994. We also know of the jealousy between the Commission and the Council's new institution responsible for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, now headed by Xavier Solana. But, on the whole, bureaucratic rivalry is a neglected field of study in IOs.

(ii) **Role (conflict) analysis**

One of the problems of a bureaucratic approach is the assumption that every individual bureaucrat will be loyal to the organisation (or subdivision) (s)he is working for and thus will promote the narrow interest of that organisation (or subdivision). Indeed, quite some work on international organisations deals with the loyalty conflict experienced by international civil servants as well as national representatives to IOs. The theoretical literature suggests that many factors push these individuals to taking on an IO's perspective rather than a national perspective. This is accounted for three factors (Willets 1988). First, processes of socialisation. Second, the element of time (which sometimes makes it impossible for national representatives to ask for instructions from home). Finally, the fact that for many countries the staff at IOs is larger than the bureaucracy at home that is supposed to check their activities. The solution to role conflicts may be the key to understanding why international civil servants take specific positions on substantial issues. The role conflict is itself another expression of the agent-principal problem. The pressure experienced by an international civil servant may be related to the incentives an IO and a home state can impose\(^27\). At the same time, an international civil servant, or a large number of them in an IO's subdivision, by be guided in solving their role conflict by substantive considerations regarding the issue at stake. Epistemic communities may be very important in his respect. Here again we find an example of how

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\(^{26}\) See, for a recent overview, Stern and Verbeek 1998.

\(^{27}\) Of course, an IO in this situation acts as a principal.
rational choice and constructivist perspectives should complement rather than fight each other. Nevertheless, large-scale studies of international civil servants' attitudes and role conflicts are rare.

(iii) Policy subsystem theory

Another fruitful inroad to analysing decision making within international organisations is the application of the so-called policy subsystem framework. Policy subsystems are usually associated with American pressure group politics. Policy subsystems refer to stable patterns of influence between a limited number of actors who manage to determine policy making in a specific issue area for a long time. Policy subsystems exist because of asymmetries in information between governments and pressure groups and because pressure groups can deliver crucial votes, directly or indirectly (through money). Now, although decision making within international organisations is distinct from American politics, we should be aware that certain issue areas are dominated by a small group of actors to which (parts of) international organisations belong also. This is especially true for the European Union that has known such policy subsystems to exist, for example, in agriculture (until the mid-1990s) and the petrochemical industry (to the present). Why would such an approach not be useful in explaining for instance airfares in the IATA? The advantage of the approach is that it pays explicit attention to the role of specialised media, NGOs and TNCs, as well as to the impact of specific actors at the domestic level, such as national departments.

(iv) Crisis decisionmaking: for example groupthink

Finally, research into IOs' decision making could also profit from the enormous expertise that has been built in the literature on (foreign policy) crisis decision making. Crisis situations, often defined as a perception of a threat to fundamental values as well as the experience of time pressure and surprise, often, but not always, result in behaviour that deviates from what the rationalist perspective would suggest. Some of the crisis literature deals with the behaviour of small groups. The best-known example is Janis's groupthink hypothesis (1984) claiming that, under specific conditions, cohesive groups will tend to reach premature consensus on a certain issue and thus risk bringing about a policy failure. Many international organisations deal with crisis situations, and, often, small task forces are installed in order to deal with the problem. Most prominent at this moment, of course, would be the decisions by the EU's Veterinary Committee on mouth and foot disease that is devastating the UK and the Netherlands. Only one example of a small group analysis in IOs comes to mind. Ngaire Woods's analysis of the way small task forces in the IMF and World Bank dealt with the 1994 Mexican Peso crisis and the 1997-8 Asian monetary crisis (Woods 1999). Yet, many international problems show crisis characteristics, especially problems of refugees and humanitarian relief. The more international organisations dealing with such problems are of a technical character, the more likely it is that the groups formed to deal with emergency situations will be 'cohesive groups'.

4.3 Re-examine existing cases

It should be obvious that some of the suggestions made above require the initiation of new research. The analysis of role conflict demands large-scale survey studies on the attitudes of
international civil servants. Yet, I think that some progress can also be made by re-examining existing research into decision making within international organisations. Charles Ragin’s strategy of combining classical case study designs and variable oriented designs offers the possibility of re-examining existing single cases with a new set of variables (Ragin 1987, esp ch 5; cf Yin 1994, 121-123). It should thus be possible to test a hypothesis on bureaucratic politics in IO decision making by employing the empirical material presented in earlier single cases even though these cases do not pay explicit attention to bureaucratic politics at all. Of course, this so-called case survey strategy entails a lot of methodological caveats. Nevertheless, I think that it is worth exploring this avenue if only to make use of the single case studies that have been conducted so far.

5. Conclusion

This paper is best summarised by formulating several propositions for debate. A first set of propositions deals with the weaknesses of studies into IOs decision making. A second set of propositions suggests several remedies to these weaknesses.

(I) Propositions regarding weaknesses in the study of IO decision making

Proposition I.1

The study of decision making in international organisations is hampered by the neglect of formal IOs in the study of international regimes and global governance.

Proposition I.2

The study of decision making in international organisations is hampered by the debate between rationalists and constructivists. The debate hinders attention to the tension between states’ interests and the interests of an international organisation and the possibility that the outcome of decision making is not an clear victory for either actor.

Proposition I.3

The study of decision making in international organisations is hampered by the predominance of single case studies and their tendency to look at specific observable decisions only.

(II) Propositions regarding remedying weaknesses in the study of IO decision making

Proposition 2.1

An agent-principal framework does recognise the starting point that, in the end, decision making in IOs is related to the interests of the (most important) member states, but allows for
theorising an IOs freedom of manoeuvre. It thus avoids the problems of the rationalist-constructivist debate.

**Proposition 2.2**

Research into decision making within international organisations should take into account the problems of agenda setting, timing, and nondecisions.

**Proposition 2.3**

Research into decision making within international organisations should make use of existing, so-called middle range theories such as bureaucratic politics, small group dynamics, role conflict and policy subsystem theory. The application of these theories should be founded in the fundamental conflict that is portrayed by the agent-principal framework.

**Proposition 2.4**

Research into decision making within international organisations should make use of existing single case studies by developing a so-called case survey design.

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