

Authority and Control in International Organisations

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Topic of the Workshop

International organisations (IOs) have become prominent actors in our political life. The European Union, in cooperation with the International Monetary Fund, decisively shapes the budgetary terms in half-a-dozen of its member states. NATO is in charge of the currently largest overseas military deployment. The World Trade Organization affects the external trading patterns of most countries and increasingly impacts upon domestic policies as well. And the World Health Organization plays a vital role in coordinating responses to the outbreak of diseases. The vast majority of current policy issues have a cross-border dimension, and IOs play an increasingly important part in addressing them.

Over the last three decades, scholars have made major contributions to our understanding of IOs. We now understand much better why IOs exist, how they are designed and develop, why sovereign states delegate important tasks to IOs, and how international organisations ensure compliance and have effects on the ground (e.g. Keohane 1984; Martin 1992; Moravcik 1998; Abbott and Snidal 1998; Koremenos, Lipson and Snidal 2001; Pollack 2003; Hawkins et al. 2006; Alter 2009).

While the study of the institutional design of IOs and of its effects thus is rather advanced, we know much less about the day-to-day processes of decision-making and interaction within IOs. We particularly still know far too little about *who has authority in IOs* and *how authority in IOs is controlled*. Authority can be attributed to specific branches of an IO or specific actors or bodies within it. Its emergence and its continued existence result not only from formal institutional rules, but also from actor's bureaucratic expertise, information, networks with actors outside of the organisation, and other sources of informal influence. Authority in IOs is subsequently not only controlled through formal voting rights, but also through informal means (Stone 2011).

This workshop wants to contribute to second-generation scholarship on IOs, which sees IOs not just as passive executors of a mandate given to them by the member states, but as organisations which follow own organisational dynamics and possess agency (also see Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Its main objectives are to contribute to our understanding of the day-to-day operation of international organisations, the conceptualisation of authority in and of international organisations, and to the literature on informal governance. It is theoretically and methodologically inclusive and seeks to go beyond current boundaries in rationalist and constructivist scholarship.

Authority in and of International Organisations

Most observers acknowledge that IOs command different kinds of authority. Yet the actual theoretical and empirical study of the contribution that Secretary-Generals, secretariats, committee chairmen, experts, and others make remains limited (for notable exceptions: Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 2004; Tallberg 2006; Cronin and Hurd 2008; Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009; Oestreich 2012; Fang and Stone 2012). Where scholars do study IOs beyond the member states, there exists a split along ontological lines. Those who employ rational choice institutionalism and the principal-agent model often use a narrow concept of authority or qualify it as a by-product of delegation. Constructivists, on the other hand, may overrate the importance of authority perceptions in comparison to material sources of power and influence.

Principal-agent scholars have mostly argued that the authority and agency of IOs is limited. They argue that controls are strict (see also below) and that IO activity tends to follow the instructions and the guidelines of the member states. They acknowledge that delegation in IOs may lead to some discretion for IOs (“no pain, no gain”, Lake and McCubbins 2006: 343), but that in any case agency and authority in IOs were foreseen by the principals. IOs may be causally important actors, but they “are actors in an intergovernmental play written, and periodically rewritten, by the [member states]”

(Pollack 2003: 41). Where scholars argue that agents move beyond what principals had intended, it is considered as controversial (see debate between Majone (2001) and Alter (2009) versus Pollack (2003) and Elsig and Pollack (2013)).

Constructivists, on the other hand, have claimed that IOs have considerable authority. Their concept is, however of a different kind. It is based on expertise and the legitimacy beliefs of particular actors rather than pooled or delegated competence (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, Hurd 2007, Cronin and Hurd 2008). The focus is more on IO bureaucracies and their organisational logic rather than the fine distinctions between principals and agents *within* IOs that are discussed by rationalist scholars. While uncovering important logics in the emergence and promotion of IO authority, much of the work remains informed by case studies. It does not yet theorise the conditions under which authority in and of IOs is emerging.

In conclusion, academic scholarship on international organisations can benefit considerably from specifying the conditions under which IOs obtain authority beyond what the member states may have intended (Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009 and Oestreich 2012 make steps in this direction). This potentially brings different perspectives closer together. Thought furthermore needs to be given to research design.

Control of International Organisations

The control of IOs remains an even more understudied field of inquiry (despite recent work by Stone 2011, 2013). As with authority, studying control patterns within IOs requires us to open up the black-box of policy-making in practice. Rationalists have long pointed to formal rules and power-holders in IOs, whether they are the five permanent members of UN Security Council or veto-players in the EU (e.g. Tsebelis 2002). Yet scholars need to look beyond those formal rules. Randall Stone (2011), for example, convincingly shows how the United States can dominate the global economic institutions, when the stakes are high, with only a minority share of formal votes.

When considering the informal instruments of controlling authority in IOs, there is a whole research agenda to be uncovered. Larger member states may have privileged access to decision-makers with authority. States may furthermore control IOs through strategic personnel appointments (e.g. Kleine 2012). Well-connected states may also pre-cook agreements amongst themselves through formal and informal group politics. Larger states may furthermore invest in “shadow bureaucracies” (Lake and McCubbins 2006) to be able to independently assess IO performance. Or alternatively, they rely on third party information coming from non-governmental organisations. There thus exists informal inequality between the formal veto players. This is worth analysing.

Going beyond principal-agent perspectives, IOs may be held accountable through a variety of other mechanisms, and may also be expected to be accountable to those who are affected by their decisions (and not just their ‘principals’; Grant and Keohane 2005). Public opinion, norms, and advocacy networks as well as intra-organisational values and practices may offer mechanisms that prevent actors in international organisations from exerting excessive power. In other words, the exertion of authority by IOs, where it exists, is subject to a number of control and accountability mechanisms which are oftentimes subtle, yet form a necessary ingredient of the analysis of international organisations.

In conclusion, the informal control of international organisations is extensive yet scholars have only recently started to analyse the checks-and-balances of authority in IOs. While we need to get a better insight into the fine details of informal control, also this subject of inquiry will benefit from comparative research going beyond individual cases in individual IOs.

Call for Papers

We welcome theoretical and empirical papers that address one or several of the workshop's research questions. Most of the papers will focus on either one of them (be it “who has authority in IOs” or “how is authority in IOs controlled”). We encourage papers from different epistemological and ontological backgrounds and particularly those who want to transcend the established dividing lines in our field of study. We are interested in comparative and mixed-methods approaches, allowing to go beyond individual case studies. We do not narrow down our analytical focus to specific policy fields or specific organisations. The workshop seeks to achieve a sound balance between beginning and more established scholars in the field.

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