The Informalization of Global Governance

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Workshop Outline and Relation to Existing Research

A wave of recent research focuses on the role of informal governance in global politics (Pauwelyn et al. 2012, Christiansen and Neuhold 2012, Conzelmann 2012, Stone 2013, Kleine 2014). In this context the issue has been raised that there is not one single definition of what informal governance might mean in a global context (Christiansen and Neuhold 2013). The academic debate points us into the direction that informal governance refers to the systematic influence of unwritten rules, shared expectations, or norms within the international system that modify or substitute for formal treaty provisions (Stone 2013: 123). It is seen to include informal practices within formal international organizations (IOs), informal institutions, and a broad array of networks constituted by state and non-state actors.

The first wave of research on the topic approached informal governance from a functionalist perspective and emphasized its efficiency advantages vis-à-vis formal agreements (Aust 1986, Lipson 1991, Abbott and Snidal 2000, Koremenos et al. 2001, Prantl 2005, Kleine 2013). More recent contributions focus on the political dimensions of informal governance, arguing that distributional conflict and power asymmetries matter for the functioning, design, and outcomes of informal politics (Stone 2011, 2013, Koremenos 2013, Westerwinter 2013, 2014). We propose to build on this work to further develop the evolving research agenda on informal global governance. We do this by taking a political perspective on informal governance by emphasizing that actors that cooperate through informal arrangements typically pursue conflicting agendas, compete for scarce resources, and struggle for influence over policy-making, implementation and institution-building.

The workshop we propose will break new ground in the study of informal global governance by focusing on the blind spots of the existing literature: 1) mechanisms of informal governance, 2) weak players in informal global governance, 3) informal interactions among IOs, and 4) informal governance outside IOs, including by non-state actors. We welcome papers that address one or more of these four main research areas as well as related topics.

To begin with, we will focus on mechanisms of informal governance. In particular, informal modes of governing do not exist in isolation but are typically related to formal institutions in multiple ways. Informal norms and practices may serve as an instrument to cope with imperfect formal processes by complementing or substituting for formal rules (Snidal and Vabulas 2013, Christiansen and Neuhold 2012, Prantl 2005, Downs and Rocke 1990). Koremenos (2013), for example, argues that if international treaties lack formalized punishment measures but the issue around which cooperation evolves requires them, enforcement is likely to be provided through informal channels. Human rights agreements are a case in point: while many of them lack formal mechanisms to punish violations, they are often enforced informally by empowering domestic and transnational human rights groups which then pressure states to honor their commitments (2013: 157). Another motivation for actors to utilize informal governance mechanisms is that they make it less costly to pursue

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1For further examples, see the 2013 special issue of Review of International Organization on Informal Governance in International Organizations.
goals and organize activities not considered publicly acceptable (Helmke and Levitsky 2004: 730). In the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission, for example, formal structures deliberately designed to empower weak actors and increase the local ownership of peacebuilding are riddled with the strong influence of informal networks dominated by large donors, with recognizable consequences for peace-building strategy-making (Westerwinter 2013). Following Stone (2011), we argue that the balance between formal and informal governance mechanisms within a particular institution or issue area can be usefully understood as an equilibrium outcome shaped by the distribution of power and interests and that the specifics of formal-informal interactions vary with the context in which they occur.

Second, we will consider the strategies of informal governance utilized by “weak players” in global governance. Specifically, power asymmetries among international actors are likely to determine what types of informal arrangement the actors choose to shape policy outcomes. While “powerful” actors exert informal control more directly, as in the case of US influence over the policies of the IMF and the World Bank (Woods 2003: 108-9, Stone 2011), allegedly “weak” actors such as small states and NGOs, resort to other informal strategies, including forming coalitions and building networks of like-minded others (Schneider and Tobin 2013). Furthermore, such informal arrangements may be a source of power in their own right (Avant and Westerwinter 2014). For example, informal networks through which actors receive and disseminate strategically valuable information may be a source of bargaining leverage in negotiations over the design of regulatory policies and institutions. “Weak” actors may become empowered by occupying privileged positions in such networks, as in the case of the creation of the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Providers: here, Switzerland and human rights NGOs achieved an outcome close to their preferences by using their central positions in informal networks to control access to negotiations, set agendas, and shape policy proposals (Avant 2013).

Third, we examine informal interactions among formal international organizations. Members of IOs may deliberately choose informality as the organizational form of cooperation due to the speed, simplicity and flexibility of informal intergovernmental arrangements (Lipson 1991: 533).2 However, such an efficiency-oriented perspective tends to neglect the importance of distributive conflicts, bargaining, and power (Stone 2013). It also tends to lose sight of the unintended side effects of informal politics on participation, influence, and democratic legitimacy (Christiansen and Neuhold 2012). Yet, informal governance emerges and persists because it yields positive returns to powerful actors and makes these actors more willing to accept the constraints of formal institutions (Stone 2011). In the regulation of global finance, for example, the G8 serves the most powerful states as a forum for sharing views and reaching consensus on important global financial matters which is then presented as a fait accompli to the broader IMF membership so that developing countries with diverging views have only limited room for influencing policies (Vabulas and Snidal 2013: 194). We also consider the possibility that informal arrangements may operate at variance with formal organizational provisions (Stone 2011, Marcoux and Urpelainen 2013). Informal networks, for example, can be a flexible means for strategic actors to overcome institutional constraints and redirect outcomes to their liking; they allow for the “bending the iron bars” of formal governance (Peng 2010: 774). The Ordinary Legislative Procedure between the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers illustrates how formal and informal procedures can interact (Farrell and Heritier 2003). In this complex setting, informal governance mechanisms have allowed the Parliament to expand its influence into the security

2See also Snidal and Vabulas (2013), Prantl (2005), and Downs and Rocke (1990).
and foreign policy domains, which led to an informal increase of the democratic accountability of policy-making in these areas.

Finally, we will study informal governance beyond existing formal, treaty-based structures. Some actors, such as “weak-but-rising-powers” (Brazil, Russia, India, China) or NGOs, may choose to work through informal governance arrangements to bypass formal institutions whose organizational procedures disadvantage them (Snidal and Vabulas 2013: 214, Westerwinter 2014). Informal networks created outside of formal arrangements also have important consequences for political participation as well as the distribution of resources and influence (Avant and Westerwinter 2014); take for example a network in which various governmental and non-governmental actors engaged in post-conflict peacebuilding exchange information and knowledge about the problems they are dealing with (Westerwinter 2013). When actors vary in their network position, this creates informational asymmetries. Those that occupy central positions may receive decisive advantages, such as superior information, better access to key players, and opportunities to forge coalitions of like-minded actors, thereby obtaining the ability to set agendas, frame problems, and influence policies at early stages of negotiation processes (Kahler 2009, Lake and Wong 2009).

The complexity of these four research areas will require the use of diverse methodological approaches and the inclusion of a broad range of issue areas. The methodological repertoire required to study the power politics of informal governance is directly driven by the difficulty of measuring informal structures, processes, and outcomes: by their very nature, informal processes leave few traces. Often, they are unobservable and their mere existence is difficult to pin down (Koremenos 2013: 138). Informal institutions produce meager paper trails, if any. Meetings are rarely announced publicly, information on participants is difficult to obtain, and decision-making is documented only rudimentarily or not at all (Snidal and Vabulas 2013: 205, Christiansen and Neuhold 2012: 2). Thus, “researching informal governance is an attempt at studying the invisible or at least the opaque, and as a result methods have to be fine-tuned to deal with the particular challenges in this regard” (Christiansen and Neuhold 2012: 2). By drawing on a number of informal arrangements in a range of issue areas, including security, economics, environment, and human rights, we seek to overcome these methodological challenges. We will also encourage a multi-methods approach to the study of informal governance that combines different methods of data collection and analysis to generate and test hypotheses about the emergence, development, and effects of informal global governance.

**Types of Papers**

We wish to attract papers that focus on a range of substantive issues in different policy domains (e.g. security, economics, environment, human rights) and regulatory contexts, with approaches that draw on various aspects of the power politics of informal global governance. We are soliciting contributions from all subfields of political science and other social science disciplines that examine the interplay between informal governance, power, and conflicts of interest as well as empirically analyze how the interactions between these elements affect outcomes. Papers that combine innovative theoretical arguments with original empirical research are particularly welcome. Methodologically, contributions using comparative case study approaches, statistical analysis, and formal methods are equally welcome. We also value papers that examine the conceptual issues involved in the study of informal governance.

**Biographical Notes**
Christine Neuhold is Professor within the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS), Maastricht University. Since May 1 2013, she holds the Special Chair of EU Democratic Governance. As of September 1 2013, she is the Director of the Graduate School of FASoS, Maastricht University. She holds her doctoral degree in Political Science from the University of Vienna. She has published widely on EU integration, with a special focus on democratic and informal governance.

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References


