

Political Economy, Markets, and Institutions

# The Public's Role in Politicizing International Issues: Why Multilateralism Needs to Take Public Opinion More Seriously

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The aim of this article is to introduce a framework that expands our understanding of the power of public opinion in influencing decisions at the multilateral level, with particular focus on the relationship between public opinion and legitimacy of international institutions and IOs. The framework traces how multilateral issues evolve from having high consensus to being highly contested, or vice versa. The progression and pathways become clear when public contestation is disentangled from elite contestation. Further, it argues that the faster pace of issue politicization is aided by the political ecology dominated by social media, as compared to the period when news media were the public's main source of information on international matters.

Political elites are the key actors of multilateralism, defined as the act of "coordinating relations among three or more states in accordance with certain principles" (Ruggie 1992, 568). This exclusiveness reflects the structure of each state's political system, where key decisions are left to a few representatives. Complex behind-the-scenes negotiations, driven largely by norms that are not necessarily codified, further leave the public less aware of issues at stake amid the anarchy of the global environment. This, then, creates information asymmetries between the leaders and the constituents they serve. Because of the presumed insignificant role of the public in international affairs, its opinion has, at times, been viewed as irrelevant, with early scholars even agreeing that public opinion is volatile and incoherent and can be easily manipulated, especially by the elites (Almond 1950; Lippmann 1955). Nonetheless, as contemporary theorists found evidence for the rationality and stability of the public's views over time (Page and Shapiro 1992; Bélanger and Pétry 2005), public opinion continues to be on the periphery of multilateralism.

By drawing on political communication and international relations literature, this article explores public opinion's future role in multilateralism. The bulk of public opinion scholarship on international affairs continues to be state-centric: a state's public has opinions on policies that deal with another state (e.g., war, trade, development), which are then incorporated in leaders' state decisions moving forward. While domestic public opinion on foreign policies is studied comparatively, rarely is its influence conceptualized as *directly* crossing state boundaries without going through state-level institutions or elites. To be fair,

the state serves as a useful analytical tool in defining the scope of *the public* and its opinion, yet its influence should not be limited only within the domestic sphere as a first-order effect.

One area where public opinion directly affects multilateralism relates to people's views on international institutions and organizations (IOs). Here, international institutions are defined as "*sets of rules* meant to govern international behavior" (Martin and Simmons 2012, 328 [italics original]), like trade rules, while IOs are associations of multilateral actors that "participate in the creation, implementation, and interpretation of substantive rules" (329), like the World Trade Organization (WTO). Public opinion has at least two normative roles in multilateral governance involving international institutions and IOs. First, it compels accountability (Hutchings 2005)—something that the elites have successfully circumvented due to the lack of direct democracy mechanisms at the international level. Since the public still finds it difficult to access formal mechanisms in holding decision-makers accountable, the easier option is to resort to more informal avenues of challenging international institutions and IOs. And second, whether or not it is rational or stable or accurately portrays the people's will, public opinion has increasingly become a large part of *audience beliefs* that help maintain the legitimacy of multilateral governance (for an overview, see Tallberg and Zürn 2019). Public contestation, which has resulted in policy changes at the international level (see Fox and Brown 1998b; Keck and Sikkink 1998), is no longer the purview of a few interest groups, owing significantly to

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the public's access to and control of information afforded by the social media environment.

The foremost aim of this article is to introduce a framework that expands our understanding of the power of public opinion in influencing decisions at the multilateral level (i.e., higher than state institutions). Given the vast potential of this topic, I will focus on the relationship between public opinion and legitimacy of international institutions and IOs. There has been a recent wave of scholarship investigating public contestation and politicization of international cooperation, which is a key outcome in multilateralism. I build on these studies by positing a framework that traces how multilateral issues evolve from having high consensus to being highly contested, or vice versa. The progression and pathways become clear when public contestation is disentangled from elite contestation. Further, I argue that the faster pace of issue politicization is aided by the political ecology dominated by social media, as compared to the period when news media were the public's main source of information on international matters.

To understand the constraining or enabling effects of public opinion in multilateralism, it is vital to first flesh out the nature of public opinion and the roles of the elites versus the public as nonelites in public opinion formation, as this leads to conceptualizing both actors' interaction in global governance. I then introduce a framework on international issue politicization with a more nuanced characterization compared to the conventional "high-low" contestation schemes. This framework identifies conflicting goals at each level of issue politicization, typically between the public and elites, and dynamically illustrates how an international issue can move from one level of politicization to another. The extent of this issue evolution hinges on at least two factors: how homogeneous or disintegrated the public and elites are in their views on a specific international issue; and the hybrid media system, which fills the public's information gap on international issues and plays a significant role in public opinion formation. This article ends by discussing why IOs, as the prime advocates of multilateralism, should embrace the hybrid media system not only in creating a positive institutional image but also in actively diagnosing and treating potential threats to interstate cooperation from the public.

Before proceeding, several assumptions should be made clear. First, an important aspect of public opinion is that it can be informal and not deliberative yet still be collectively rational and influential. Attempts to formalize public opinion—through a direct voting mechanism, sophisticated deliberative polling, or other democratic processes outside the current representative or "shareholder" structure—and integrate it into global governance systems would remain difficult and futile, as it has been even at the most local levels within a state. Second, despite this informality and lack of deliberativeness, public opinion can still hold international decision-makers accountable, and even delegitimize multilateral systems. As I explicate in this piece, its power to do so usually starts at the domestic level and goes up. While the state remains a crucial battleground in changing or maintaining public consensus on international issues, it

is nonetheless possible for public opinion to directly affect international institutions and IOs, resulting in a more consequential blow to global governance systems. Third, and lastly, while the entry of social media has made public opinion seemingly more volatile and susceptible to manipulation, it has also allowed political players to monitor the public's sentiment more easily and deploy preemptive communication strategies at an earlier period. In the final section of this article, I argue that IOs, as actors of international cooperation, need to rethink their function to better monitor public opinion and address misinformation.

## PUBLIC OPINION, ELITE INTERACTION, AND MULTILATERAL LEGITIMACY

Public opinion has been characterized as nebulous, yet it remains "one of the most vital and enduring concepts in the social sciences" (Price 1992, 1). Deconstructing each word comprising the term reveals the tension as to why public opinion is a slippery concept. On its first word: what or who constitutes the "public" delves into matters of boundary making (Price 2008). Some scholars have attempted to address this by conceptualizing a four-level continuum: the general public, the voting public, the attentive public, and the active public (e.g., the elite)—with the last two considered as *issue publics* (Price 1992). This implies that the public is not homogeneous, and a particular stratum can be more attentive and actively involved depending on the issue at stake. On the other hand, "opinion" can assume opposite values: something that does not have any technical merit (as compared to "knowledge") or is esteemed due to its source's expert or moral authority (e.g., legal opinion). With the ubiquity of sophisticated survey research methods starting in the twentieth century (Delli Carpini 2011), public opinion has now been understood as an aggregate of individual preferences and an average representation of different publics that reflect the norms central to social integration (for an overview, see Donsbach and Traugott 2008).

The significance of public opinion arose with the fall of absolute monarchy and the rise of Enlightenment, as it became a new source of authority and legitimacy in governance (Barber 1984; Peters 1995). Public opinion, however, does not matter only in states with democratic or representative forms of government, as authoritarian regimes look to it as a barometer in ensuring effective top-down response to citizen dissatisfaction or issue polarization (Chen and Xu 2017). The general scholarly consensus is that public opinion does influence public policy, but this relationship depends on the issue's salience to the public (i.e., the more salient, the stronger the relationship) and threats from powerful interest groups, including the elites (for a review, see Burstein 2003).

There are at least three priors of public opinion formation. First, individuals already possess prior beliefs, ideologies, and worldviews toward an issue; in short, they are not blank canvases. Second, individuals have different levels of critical information processing and reactions due to variations in socioeconomic background. And third, public

opinion patterns vary by issue domain and across time (Jacobs and Shapiro 2011). These three features provide the bedrock upon which individuals form opinions and are influenced by political information from different sources, especially the media and elites.

#### ELITE VERSUS MASS OPINION

Political elites are defined as “individuals and small, relatively cohesive, and stable groups with disproportionate power to affect national and supranational political outcomes on a continuing basis” (Best and Higley 2018, 3). In multilateralism, these comprise state politicians and IO bureaucrats, as well as nonstate actors that have some control over the deployment of money and political decisions, such as multinational corporations, philanthropists, and even religious leaders (Hafner-Burton, Hughes, and Victor 2013). Even without clear-cut distinctions, the elites and the mass public (nonelites) can be generally distinguished based on their positional, decisional, and reputational differences (Hoffmann-Lange 2018a), implying the relevance of power in this dichotomy. Both segments also have at least four interrelated behavioral differences when it comes to foreign affairs (Dietrich, Hardt, and Swedlund 2021, 599). First, the elites are said to possess the necessary knowledge and experience in making foreign policy decisions. Second, these experiences have taught them to be better at taking risks. Third, due to information overload, the elites may tend to oversimplify contexts and be overconfident in their decisions, tendencies that sometimes could have adverse consequences. Finally, the elites tend to be more tolerant than the mass public, as the former are predisposed to this quality by their demographic and personality characteristics, which are honed by political socialization (see Sullivan et al. 1993).

Because they possess more information, resources, and power, the elites have greater influence over the public. They employ rhetoric and other persuasion strategies in setting the agenda, priming and framing issues to affect the public's attitudes and beliefs (Chong and Druckman 2011). A favorable public opinion is extremely important for a certain type of elites called “representative elites,” or those “expected to function as the political representation of salient ideological and material interests present in their societies” (Best and Vogel 2018, 340). The elite's advantages, however, do not diminish the public's capacity for rational decision-making. This is evident from the literature on deliberative democracy, which is concerned about “how to include everyone under conditions where they are effectively motivated to really think about the issues” (Fishkin 2011, 1). As a counterpoint to “mass democracy” models that simply aggregate individual opinions, deliberative democratic theory values group decision-making, informed and rigorous assessment, and collective action (see Fishkin 1993; Gastil, Knobloch, and Gilmore 2017). This bottom-up model, however, has been met with criticisms at the normative (“Is this the system we really want?”), theoretical (“Do its parts fit together?”), and empirical (“Does it work?”) levels (for a review, see Katz 2017). Most evidence on the effectiveness of deliberative democracy has looked at on-

line and offline deliberation through political talk within small groups, yet questions remain as to whether deliberative democratic models really produced a better outcome or a higher level of “collective intelligence” than group decisions through simple aggregation (Cappella, Zhang, and Price 2017). All these relate to the core assumption introduced earlier that public opinion need not be deliberative and formalized into the policy-making process for it to have well-informed influence.

#### MULTILATERAL LEGITIMACY

The mechanisms of public opinion in policy-making extend beyond the level of states, as posited by some scholarly works in international relations. Putnam's (1988) two-level game, where state leaders are situated as negotiators simultaneously in the international and the domestic spheres, highlights the public's ability to constrain the leader's decisions in foreign affairs. Here, domestic ratification need not be formal (e.g., undergo legislative process) but can also be informal, as measured through public opinion (Conceição-Heldt and Mello 2017). Another theory involves domestic audience costs, which illustrate how state leaders justify their commitment's credibility to attack, back down, or further escalate by saying that their hands are tied by their domestic constituents (Fearon 1994). Audience costs manifest most especially from among the public's segment that are active in politics, as well as those who deeply care about their country or leader's reputation (Tomz 2007).

While the two-level game and audience costs explain how domestic environments restrain or encourage domestic leaders' international commitments, a less-examined strand of literature investigates public opinion relative to global governance and international institutions, irrespective of state leaders' decisions. Among these are studies looking at public support for IOs, such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, and even regional IOs (see Cox 2002; Edwards 2009; Holyk 2010; Schlipphak 2015; Voeten 2013). Interesting patterns have been surfaced, including high support for IOs when the public perceives its domestic institutions as flawed (e.g., Milner, Nielson, and Findley 2016), gaps between citizens' and leaders' reception toward IOs (e.g., Page and Barabas 2000), and variations of support level across IOs on similar sector-specific issues (e.g., Greenhill 2020). These findings broadly imply public opinion's relationship with IO legitimacy—the *audience belief* that an IO's authority (right to decide) is appropriately exercised, also taking into consideration the IO's actual performance (decision's output, outcome, or impact) and institutional procedures (method to decide; Tallberg and Zürn 2019). Legitimacy is different from support, as the latter is only partly driven by instrumental cost-benefit calculation. “Legitimacy refers to a reservoir of confidence in an institution that is not dependent on short-term satisfaction with its distributional outcomes” (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 587). For example, the public may not side with an international court's decision for selfish reasons but may continue upholding the court's legitimacy (see Voeten 2013).

## POLITICIZATION OF MULTILATERALISM

The previous section provided a brief overview of the nature of public opinion, its significance in policy-making, the elite's role in public opinion formation, and how these processes tie with (de)legitimizing international institutions and IOs. In this section, I present the framework that elucidates potential mechanisms on how public opinion legitimizes or challenges multilateral norms and practices through *issue politicization*.

### CONSEQUENCES OF POLITICIZATION

Politicization in the multilateral setting has been defined as the “growing *public awareness* of international institutions and increased *public mobilization* of competing political preferences regarding institutions' policies or procedures” (Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012, 71 [emphasis mine]). Politicization intensifies as IOs are given more authority over inter-state affairs, coupled with increased contestation from the public.

According to De Vries, Hobolt, and Walter (2021), there are *four consequences of politicization* based on whether issue contestation is high or low, and whether political structures (i.e., coalitions, elections, referendums, or other institutionalized accountability mechanisms) are lacking or present in challenging international cooperation. The first consequence is *permissive consensus*, wherein contestation is low and political structures are lacking. This is typically the case when international institutions and IOs have broad public acceptance and issue salience among the public is low. This term was taken from Lindberg and Scheingold (1970), which used to describe the level of politicization of what was then the European Community project in the 1950s and 1960s. They noted that “the Community enterprise was seemingly taken for granted as an accepted part of the political landscape, making it relatively easy to mobilize support for projects to advance or protect the economic programs of the Community” (62). For sure, this is not the case anymore, as the European Union (EU) is one of the most contested and politicized international institutions. Nevertheless, De Vries and colleagues argue that most institutions of multilateralism do not attract a lot of public debate, and for institutions such as the International Civil Aviation Organization, the World Meteorological Organization, or the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, “public opinion matters little to how these institutions are created, function, or decay” (2021, 320).

The second consequence is *democratically legitimized international cooperation*, wherein contestation is low but political structures are present. Unlike the first consequence, international cooperation is more institutionalized through mechanisms such as referendums or direct democracy. An example illustrated by De Vries and colleagues is Switzerland's membership in the UN. In 2002 eight referendums were held in the country, one of which was a federal popular initiative where 54.6 percent of Swiss voters were in favor of its joining the UN. Prior to this, Switzerland had always stayed away from UN membership, even if it participated in

several specialist UN agencies, to maintain its international character of diplomatic neutrality during the Cold War. A similar referendum was implemented in 1986, which was defeated. A decade after the end of the Cold War, and as the UN's rationale and mission likewise evolved, the country became more conscious of the idea that “non-membership could politically sideline Switzerland and tarnish its image abroad” (Switzerland Federal Department of Foreign Affairs n.d.). In September 2022 Switzerland became the 190th member of the UN, and since then the issue has had broad consensus and legitimacy.

The third and fourth consequences refer to situations with high levels of contestation. In *public discontent*, the lack of political structure does not allow for effective ramifications in multilateralism, yet discontentment continues to simmer. As mentioned earlier, several EU member states are dissatisfied with the international organization. According to the summer 2022 results of the Eurobarometer, eight member states have a majority view of distrusting the EU. These are Greece (60 percent), Cyprus (54 percent), France (53 percent), Austria, Slovenia, Slovakia, Czechia, and Croatia (all 50 percent; European Commission 2022). Despite this Euroskepticism, it would still be difficult for each of their respective party skeptics to mobilize the numbers needed to have a strong political coalition to withdraw membership in the EU.

On the other hand, the existence of political structures and opportunities in a highly contested environment would result in *challenged international cooperation*. This can be done through nonratification of international commitments or withdrawal from regional integration, as in the case of the United Kingdom's Brexit. The 2016 referendum was a by-product of growing internal pressures from within the Conservative Party ranks, as well as from the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which threatened to withhold its support for the Conservative Party during the 2015 general elections (see Goodwin and Milazzo 2016). Prime Minister David Cameron initially rejected the idea of a referendum but was forced to heed the Conservative Party's 2015 election manifesto, which explicitly called for a referendum on the United Kingdom's EU membership within the next two years. After hurdling through every legislative prerequisite, the country finally held its referendum on June 23, 2016, where 51.89 percent voted for the United Kingdom to leave the EU. Of the four consequences of politicization, De Vries and others noted that this last type has “the most consequential scenario from the perspective of an international institution” (2021, 321).

### PUBLIC AND ELITE CONTESTATION

De Vries and colleagues identified contestation as a key factor in yielding the outcomes of politicization. Their article further presented the roots that explain public discontent (i.e., economic, cultural, institutional) as well as the role of political entrepreneurs (elites) in mobilizing contestation. What they did not discuss, however, was that while contestation and politicization of international issues are highly driven by the elites, it is possible that (nonelite) public opinion strongly contradicts the elite's interests. Further,

**Table 1. Levels of Issue Politicization**

		Public Contestation	
		High	Low
Elite Contestation	High	High Politicization	Elite Politicization
	Low	Democratic Politicization	Low Politicization

the elites, like the public, should not also be automatically taken as highly integrated or homogeneous in their political means and ends (see Hoffmann-Lange 2018b; Higley and Lengyel 2000). It thus follows that issue contestation needs to be reconceptualized by having at least two dimensions: public contestation and elite contestation. When both contestation types are categorized into high-low levels, a fourfold typology of issue politicization emerges (see [table 1](#)).

*High politicization* issues are those greatly contested by both the elites and the public (i.e., both segments are polarized), while *low politicization* issues have low levels of contestation from both political actors. For example, the previously mentioned case of Brexit is a highly politicized one not only because the issue was heatedly debated in the House of Commons but also because the public had been seesawing in its opinion on whether to remain or to leave the EU (What UK Thinks n.d., shows the opinion trend from September 2015 until the referendum day on June 2016 from thirteen pollsters.). This finally culminated in the referendum that legally decided on the issue. Half a decade ago, however, the issue of having a European Community was lowly politicized, which consequently resulted in a permissive consensus from both the public and elites. Lindberg and Scheingold (1970) wrote that there was enough cohesion among the party leaders across European countries, which the public took its cues from:

*The Community is primarily a creature of elites and even within this category the Community's immediate clientele tends to be restricted to those officials and interest group leaders who are directly affected by its work.... (P)olicy makers can probably move in an integrative direction without significant opposition, since this permissive consensus would tend to reduce the chances that opposing elites could mount an effective counterattack. (41)*

Meanwhile, some issues are contested but are neither highly nor lowly politicized because of incongruent attitudes between the elites and public. I term issues that are highly contested by the public but not by the elites as having a degree of *democratic politicization*. A clear example here is public and elite opinion on open trade policy in the United States. For the longest time, there has been a high level of consensus among the country's experts and decision-makers about the net advantages of trade liberalization, yet the American public continues to doubt its benefits (see Guisinger 2017). According to a 2022 Gallup survey, while Americans now hold a more positive view than in the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s, they are still less likely to view trade as an opportunity than during the Trump presidency. "The decline since 2020 has come

mostly among Republicans, who likely appreciated Trump's tougher stance on trade. Republicans' views on the issue appear to be more partisan now than in the past, when their opinions didn't vary much by the president's party" (Jones 2022). Guisinger (2017) argues that while the elites may have a strong and positive consensus about trade, their messages to the news media and in their political campaigns mostly center on its disadvantages. Her analysis of TV news coverage of trade and political ad campaigns reveals that "both sources of national economic information have focused primarily on the negative attributes of trade—job losses, factory closings, and safety and security risks—at the national level" (199) and that these are communicated "more loudly, more clearly, and more frequently" (174).

On the other hand, multilateral issues that are highly contested by the elites but not by the public are termed as having a degree of *elite politicization*. In most cases, high politicization issues stem from those categorized as elite politicization, evolving from having low public awareness to high issue salience through the elite's mobilization. For example, in Italy almost four of five people in 2007 favorably viewed the EU, but the country's fragmented politics over time have politicized this issue such that ten years later, the number dropped to only 57 percent, the largest deficit over time among EU member states (Wike et al. 2019). Another is the issue of Americans' support for international efforts to address climate change. A 2022 Pew Research survey found that an overwhelming 75 percent favor US participation in international climate change efforts (Spencer and Funk 2022), and almost 70 percent support any steps taken by the country to become carbon neutral by 2050 (Tyson, Funk, and Kennedy 2022). Climate change-related legislation and initiatives, however, have been stymied not only in Congress but also by the conservative-leaning Supreme Court, which ruled to restrict the authority of the Environmental Protection Agency to limit greenhouse gas emissions from power plants—a setback that special presidential envoy for climate John Kerry said "slowed the pace" of the government's climate agenda (Knickmeyer 2022).

These more nuanced typologies of politicization, then, allow us to have a clearer map of how a multilateral issue evolves from producing one consequence to another. I develop a framework in [table 2](#) that illustrates the possibility of an issue being able to move dynamically from one level of politicization to another, with tensions within each level that describe conflicting goals of moving up or down a level. It should be noted that neither democratic nor elite politicization is higher than the other, as signified by the gray area. Also, the processes of attaining their conflicting goals

**Table 2. Conflicting Goals at Different Levels of Politicization**

LEVELS OF POLITICIZATION	FEATURES	CONFLICTING GOALS	
		Political Structures for Contestation: Existing	Political Structures for Contestation: Lacking
<i>High Politicization</i>	High public and elite contestation	<i>Consequence: Challenged International Cooperation</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>RESOLVE through existing structures</li> <li>MOVE ↓ by decreasing public or elite contestation</li> </ul>	<i>Consequence: Discontent</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MOVE ← by creating new structures</li> <li>MOVE ↓ by decreasing public or elite contestation</li> </ul>
<i>Democratic Politicization</i>	High public–low elite contestation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Public's Goal:</b> MOVE ↑ by increasing elite contestation</li> <li><b>Elite's Goal:</b> MOVE ↓ by decreasing public contestation</li> </ul>	
<i>Elite Politicization</i>	Low public–high elite contestation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Elite's Goal:</b> MOVE ↑ by increasing public contestation</li> <li><b>Public's Goal:</b> MOVE ↓ by decreasing elite contestation</li> </ul>	
<i>Low Politicization</i>	Low public and elite contestation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Minority's Goal:</b> MOVE ↑ by increasing public or elite contestation</li> <li><b>Majority's Goal:</b> MAINTAIN through existing structures</li> </ul> <i>Consequence: Democratically Legitimized International Cooperation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Minority's Goal:</b> MOVE ↑ by increasing public or elite contestation</li> <li><b>Majority's Goal:</b> MAINTAIN OR MOVE ← by creating new structures</li> </ul> <i>Consequence: Permissive Consensus</i>

(i.e., transforming the issue into high or low politicization) are similar whether political structures are existing or lacking. This, then, implies that issues under democratic and elite politicization are crucial battlegrounds for *high* or *low* politicization.

In democratic politicization—for instance, in the case of Americans’ opinion on open trade—the public is already polarized, yet the vast majority of elites see the issue as noncontentious. (Even though political entrepreneurs in powerful positions seem to portray their aversion to free trade, they are still a minority—and most likely still support the policy behind the scenes.) Therefore, the majority elites would aim to downplay the public’s contestation by providing information and transforming public opinion to align with their beliefs. However, the public aims to pressure officials and businesses to make the issue highly contested, hoping to have more debates that would eventually lead to a resolution that changes trade policies. Meanwhile, the reverse happens in elite politicization. Because the public has either low awareness or high consensus for an international issue, the polarized elites would aim to “educate” the public by increasing its level of issue contestation. Yet the public may resist and want to maintain its issue consensus by pressuring the decision-makers to do the same. As in the case of the Italian public’s support for the EU, the elites were successful in moving the issue from elite politicization to high politicization.

After an issue attains either of the four consequences of issue politicization, as described earlier by De Vries and colleagues, I argue that there still exist conflicting tensions to move toward the middle battlegrounds (democratic or elite politicization). For example, for a low politicization issue that attained *democratically legitimized international cooperation*, the majority of the public and elites support a multilateral policy, so their goal is to maintain this status quo through institutional means. The minority’s aim, however, is to increase public or elite contestation, hoping to

move the issue up as shown in the final row, third column of [table 2](#). Meanwhile, for a low politicization issue that attained *permissive consensus* (because institutional structures are lacking as shown in the final row and column), the majority also aims to maintain this status quo or even further strengthen this stronghold by creating new institutional means. Still, the minority’s goal is to intensify public or elite contestation (move up).

In the minority’s goal of moving up, an example would be the Swiss’ evolution of their sentiments to join the UN. In an earlier referendum in 1986, three-fourths overwhelmingly rejected the proposal to be part of the UN. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, perceptions about the UN’s diplomatic neutrality started to shift. The minority view began to gain ground, as elites and the public slowly increased issue contestation (democratic/elite politicization). According to Sheehan (2002), “Those in favor of UN membership ran a straight-forward campaign, holding hundreds of town meetings around the country to argue the factual merits of joining.” Another factor was the publication of the Bergier Report, commissioned by the Swiss Parliament in 1996 and finalized in 2002, which uncovered the relations of the Nazi regime and Swiss banks, and which discredited the long-standing myth of Swiss neutrality. While the percentage of those in favor of UN membership in the 2002 referendum (54.6 percent) was not as overwhelming compared to the previous rejection in 1986 (75.7 percent), the newer result still resolved the high politicization issue through existing structures, thus legitimately challenging Switzerland’s then status quo conceptualization of its role in international cooperation.

On the other end, the tension for a high politicization issue that attained *discontent* (second row, final column of [table 2](#)) is either to decrease elite/public contestation so that the level of politicization moves down, or further intensify politicization by creating institutional contestation



structures to reach the consequence of *challenged international cooperation* (same row, third column). In the case of the United Kingdom's Brexit, the public's discontent with the EU was not as pronounced until the Conservative Party and UKIP cemented political structures for contestation by way of their coalition and resulting manifesto. Other EU member states, however, with high distrust for the EU—at least according to Eurobarometer polls—could not move on with officially withdrawing from the international organization because either they lack political structures (discontent) or their respective parliament members are not contesting the issue and would rather downplay its merits (democratic politicization).

#### INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AS POLITICAL STRUCTURES FOR CONTESTATION

So far, the framework has demonstrated political structures for contestation at the domestic level. These structures, however, are not necessarily only within the state but can be at the level of international institutions. One illustrative case here pertains to development IOs' resettlement policies for beneficiaries involuntarily affected by development projects. It is likewise an example of a low politicization issue with permissive consensus moving diagonally up toward high politicization that challenged international cooperation due to the creation of new political structures (international institutions) at the IO level.

In the 1970s and 1980s, when indigenous beneficiaries of World Bank water dam projects in the Philippines (Chico) and Brazil (Sobradinho) learned that they would be displaced, they challenged the top-down, nonconsultative approach of project implementation. It started as a lowly politicized issue domestically that eventually entered the *democratic politicization* phase, spilling outside both countries due to media publicity by nonelite interest groups. Once on a global scale, it entered the *high politicization* phase such that the technocratic elites within the World Bank would also contest the approach. World Bank sociologists and anthropologists became instrumental in siding with the beneficiaries, resulting in the issuance of a series of accountability mechanisms on involuntary resettlement that became the new structure in resolving forced relocation issues and that was copied by other IOs (Cernea 1993; Fox and Brown 1998a). The same trajectory also describes how the World Bank's Inspection Panel, its main independent complaints mechanism for project beneficiaries, came into existence after a much-publicized protest of the Sardar Sarovar dam project in India. The bank formed an independent review panel, which faulted the bank and the Indian government for the project. That group, known as the Morse Commission, became the forerunner of the Inspection Panel (Wade 1997).

#### HYBRID MEDIA AND POLITICIZATION OF MULTILATERALISM

Because (de)legitimizing multilateralism is contingent upon the degree of cohesion or disintegration of public

opinion, and since public awareness of international issues is an important component of politicization (Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012), the utilization and consumption of media become a crucial piece in the evolution of issue politicization. This final section discusses the current media environment that makes public contestation of international issues more intense, faster, and more diplomatically disruptive, thereby underscoring the need to take public opinion more seriously.

The news media have traditionally filled the public's information gaps. The press possesses the power to set the agenda and frame issues (Chong and Druckman 2007; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007; Soroka et al. 2012). This allows the public to update their beliefs on international issues and use news information in delegitimizing or holding to account multilateral players. Even if some media are considered part of the elite, they are differentiated due to their distinct preferences from politicians, especially in democratic countries. Nonpartisan news media act as independent gatekeepers and traders of information, and affect both elite and public opinion (Baum and Potter 2008). To some extent, nonpartisan news media assume the normative role of society's watchdog by siding with the public's interest over those of the powerful elites (Hanitzsch 2007). Yet in performing its tasks of surveilling and correlating various opinions (Price 1992; Boydston 2013), the press acts as the public's main source of elite opinion (Bennett 1990; Zaller 1999).

#### INCIDENTAL EXPOSURE AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

The entry of social media transformed the media ecology into a hybrid one, and political outcomes have been reshaped by the reinforcement of these new communication technologies (Chadwick 2013). Social media's reach allows the public to catch up more quickly on foreign policy issues (Baum and Potter 2019). One mechanism for this information catch-up is through the users' incidental exposure to news (Tewksbury, Weaver, and Maddex 2001). Social media provide users the opportunity to learn from political news, a type of information that is easier to recall than nonpolitical information—at least in the short term (Bode 2016). Facebook users with low political interest exposed to political information also exhibit the strongest levels of issue salience (Feezell 2018). In another study of social media users in Australia, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States, incidental news exposure was found strongly among heavy online news users from a younger age demographic and with low news interest (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018). Nevertheless, experts question the quality of information from incidental news exposure due to social media's lack of moderation, unlike in news media that adhere to gatekeeping norms (Shoemaker and Reese 1991). They caution that social media alone could not compensate for traditional sources of news, which offer more quality learning of political information (Shehata and Strömbäck 2021).

Rather than gaining political knowledge, political engagement is viewed as a more significant outcome of social media use (Oeldorf-Hirsch 2018). Incidental news exposure is associated with both online and offline political partic-

ipation (Kim, Chen, and Gil de Zúñiga 2013). Not only is high political engagement a consequence of social media use, it is also an antecedent of online political participation, including the sharing of *misinformation* (Valenzuela et al. 2019). Online engagement has also become a more accurate reflection of the public's political behaviors. During the 2016 UK Brexit and US elections, scholars concluded that "traditional polling and political forecasting does not appear to be correctly predicting voting outcomes, whereas analysis of social media platforms is increasingly showing their impact on the outcome of the vote" (Hall, Tinati, and Jennings 2018, 25).

Brexit is perhaps the most well-known example of how the hybrid media system was successfully exploited for an issue to enter the high politicization phase and result in a challenged international cooperation. Cambridge Analytica was embroiled with allegations of malpractice and data breach in microtargeting and disinforming voters to support the Brexit campaign (see reports by Cadwalladr 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). While Cambridge Analytica was officially cleared by the UK Information Commissioner from involvement in the Brexit referendum's outcome, the commissioner confirmed that "there are systemic vulnerabilities in our democratic systems" (Denham 2020, 1) that need to be addressed:

What is clear is that the use of digital campaign techniques are a permanent fixture of our elections and the wider democratic process and will only continue to grow in the future.... New technologies enable political parties and others to engage with a broad range of communities and hard to reach groups in a way that cannot be done through traditional campaigning methods alone. But for this to be successful, citizens need to have trust in how their data is being used to engage with them. (6)

#### IOS AND HYBRID MEDIA DIPLOMACY

In this hybrid media environment where multilateral issues are foreseen to be more politicized with increased involvement of public opinion, it would still be prudent to expect political elites to dominate in international policy discussions, and public contestation would swell first as a state-level affair. Even then, as exemplified by World Bank policy changes driven by public protests in the age of traditional media, public opinion would have more direct dent internationally, without needing prior acknowledgment within domestic confines. Given that IOs are among the principal players of multilateralism and stalwarts of international institutions, IOs need to also play an active role in addressing issue politicization in the hybrid media environment.

IOs advocate for multilateralism across states, and part of this task is to transform public attitudes in support for inter-state cooperation. Some IOs have started using social media to reach a broader audience (see Bjola and Zaiotti 2020). In the 2022 World Organization Power Ranking done by global communications agency BCW (Burson Cohn & Wolfe), the World Health Organization (WHO) was ranked first among IOs for capitalizing on a highly politicized international issue—the global COVID-19 pandemic—in pro-

viding content via its Twitter account that amassed an exponential growth of followers. "Three key reasons led to this massive spike [of Twitter followers] in a time of unprecedented crisis—a need for trustworthy information, moves to globally coordinate the response global response, and the search for clear consistent guidance from a credible source" (BCW 2022, 9). Despite its 10.8 million Twitter followers (it has more followers than Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Walmart combined), the WHO has only a 0.01 percent public engagement rate, which is just "good" for a social media account of this size. On the contrary, UN Women, which has only 2.1 million followers, the lowest among the top five ranked IOs, has the highest engagement rate, 0.04 percent. "UN Women is an account Twitter users turn to *organically* during international moments of *crises and celebrations of women*, and the account in turn *responds to its community*" (BCW 2022, 23 [emphasis original]). Unlike the WHO, whose content mix did not necessarily make its social media account stand out, BCW noted that UN Women's content is highly visual, and its texts are conversational and easy on the eye and provide prompts that encourage interaction, despite identity politics (gender) not usually considered a driver of influence. This shows that IOs can also drive an issue's politicization levels using social media.

IOs, and more generally institutions engaged in international diplomacy, still find it difficult to navigate the hybrid media environment because of the belief that this new ecosystem is incompatible with traditional norms of diplomatic communication. Three dimensions distinguish both practices (Lemke and Habegger 2020). In terms of scope, diplomacy relies on vetted elite actors, while the digital environment is open to interactions with anonymous players; in terms of process, the former relies on strict rules of engagement, while the latter lacks oversight; and in terms of logic, the former aims to ameliorate conflict, while the latter seems to thrive on conflict. "Simply put, the formalised and consensus-oriented communicative style of diplomacy does not mix well with the radically open and attention-oriented communication style pervading social media platforms" (Lemke and Habegger 2020, 231). These result in IOs opting to use their social media accounts purely for the traditional one-way delivery of content, thereby underutilizing the potential to better engage with the public.

As public attitudes toward IOs have become more negative over time (Bearce and Jolliff Scott 2019), IOs have invested in centralizing their public communication efforts to build a more positive image (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018). In developing countries, economic IOs are viewed more unfavorably by men as well as those with higher levels of education (Edwards 2009), a demographic that tends to skew with the political elites. This highlights the need for IOs to take an active part in elite politicization to quell possible elite-driven misinformation and disinformation propagated through social media. IOs can counter such information distortions and fabrication by communicating their organizational accomplishments and linking these with relevant foreign relations consequences, given that citizens were found to evaluate international cooperation based on the IOs' processes and outcomes (Bernauer, Mohrenberg,



and Koubi 2020). Endorsements from some IOs have also been found to shape the public's views on solving global collective action problems, such as environmental and human rights concerns (Greenhill 2020). Counteracting state-centric threats to multilateralism would entail more aggressive approaches of public opinion formation on the part of IOs. These strategies should move away from traditional methods of public relations through the news media, and embrace the use of social media to engage with the public.

## CONCLUSION

At its core, this article explores how multilateralism could become more democratizing and less elite driven. Because current global governance structures limit public participation to the periphery, citizens rely on more informal means of voicing their opinions and holding multilateral decision-makers to account. The intensity and influence of their mobilization, aided by new social networking technologies, have made more direct impact that skirts state structures in contesting the legitimacy of international institutions. While elites have also maximized the same features of the hybrid media environment in politicizing issues, IOs as the main trustees of multilateralism are still navigating this new terrain of public communication. Public opinion will continue to grow as a key aspect of international decision-making, and for this reason the future of multilateralism should take it more seriously.

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