The Origins of Legitimation Strategies in International Organizations

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The origins of legitimation strategies in international organizations:
agents, audiences and environments

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How do international organizations (IOs) claim legitimacy, and why do they do so in different ways? Confronted with contestation and critique, IO representatives actively seek to convince relevant audiences of their normative appropriateness through public communication and changes to institutions and behaviour. Yet while transborder problems such as climate change and global health crises proliferate, the legitimacy of IOs mandated to address these problems is increasingly under attack. Contestation regarding the nature and function of IOs is arising from states, including China and other emerging powers; non-state actors; and 'from within'. The populist backlash against traditional political elites and the rise of nationalist forces represent a further attack on multilateral institutions.[1]

This special section in the May 2023 issue of *International Affairs* examines the origins—that is, the central drivers—of the strategies that IOs use to build, sustain and defend their legitimacy.[2] Legitimacy—the perception of audiences that an organization is normatively appropriate—is essential for any organization to achieve its objectives. 'Enhanced order, stability, and effectiveness'[3] are typical benefits associated with legitimacy, and these benefits accrue not only to IOs but also to other public and private organizations. Therefore, scholars in a wide range of disciplines—including organization studies, sociology and political science—have long analysed how organizations claim legitimacy. We build on their efforts to generate new insights into the legitimation strategies of IOs, which we define as deliberate attempts on the part of IO agents to enhance an IO's legitimacy.[4]

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1 Liesbet Hooghe, Tobias Lenz and Gary Marks, 'Contested world order: the delegitimation of international governance', *The Review of International Organizations* 14: 4, 2018, pp. 731–43, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-018-9334-3; Stefanie Walter, 'The backlash against globalization', *Annual Review of Political Science* 24: 1, 2021, pp. 421–42, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102405.

2 We use the term 'origin' rather than 'source' in order to avoid confusion with the established terminology on the 'sources of legitimacy', which tends to refer to input vs output legitimacy. See Fritz Scharpf, *Governing in Europe: effective and democratic?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

3 David Beetham, *The legitimation of power* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), p. 33.

4 Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zürn, 'The legitimacy and legitimation of international organizations: introduc-

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Our inquiry into IO legitimation strategies makes two contributions, one empirical and one theoretical. First, the special section provides a wide-ranging empirical documentation of IO legitimation strategies in world politics and the challenges that legitimation attempts may face, thereby broadening the existing literature's narrow empirical scope. This literature has prioritized discursive legitimation over institutional and behavioural types, and focuses overwhelmingly on a few prominent and well-established organizations, such as the EU, the IMF, the UN and the WTO. This special section widens the empirical focus along both of these dimensions. In addition to giving roughly equal weight to discursive, institutional and behavioural types of legitimation, we cover a wide range of IOs, including global and regional IOs in both the global North and the global South. Most of the IOs we examine are formalized intergovernmental arrangements with an independent bureaucracy, but we also cover more informal arrangements as well as specialized agencies of higher-level IOs.

Our documentation shows that legitimation efforts are pervasive across diverse IOs, and this allows us to qualify the notion that legitimacy is necessarily tied up with questions of authority. Following Max Weber, this conception holds that only when political institutions exercise authority—that is, engage in publicly binding governance in the expectation of obedience—do questions of legitimacy arise. This ties questions of legitimacy closely to the coercive enforcement power of the state. Michael Zürn is the most prominent scholar to transfer this Weberian conception to IOs, and it underpins the stipulated 'authority–legitimacy link'.[5] Implicitly or explicitly, this link motivates the truncated empirical scope of the existing literature, and our inquiry suggests that legitimacy is as indispensable to the large majority of generally less authoritative IOs as it is to the most authoritative IOs in world politics.

Second, by synthesizing a broad set of literatures on organizational legitimation to develop a coherent analytical framework, we aim to move the theoretical discussion about the origins of IO legitimation strategies beyond the focus on the normative demands voiced by relevant audiences. The existing literature posits that agents instrumentally seek to enhance audiences' legitimacy beliefs by constructing legitimation strategies that cater to audiences' demands. This audience-based perspective is a plausible way to think about IO legitimation, but we argue that it neglects other relevant origins. Legitimation strategies, we propose, may also reflect IO *agents'* own normative beliefs. These agents then seek to convince relevant audiences of the validity and relevance of these beliefs for the IO in question. Alternatively, legitimation strategies may reflect the norms and values espoused by legitimate peer organizations in the IO's *environment*, with whose legitimation strategies the agents then align their own. These agent- and

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tion and framework', *The Review of International Organizations* 14: 4, 2019, pp. 581–606 at p. 588, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-018-9330-7.

[5] Michael Zürn, *A theory of global governance: authority, legitimacy and contestation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); see also Rodney S. Barker, *Legitimating identities: the self-presentations of rulers and subjects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Michael N. Barnett and Martha Finnemore, 'The politics, power, and pathologies of international organizations', *International Organization* 53: 4, 1999, pp. 699–732 at p. 707, https://doi.org/10.1162/002081899551048.

environment-based perspectives, respectively rooted in the literatures of political theory and organization studies, provide cogent alternatives to the audience-based perspective. Our tripartite agents–audiences–environment (AAE) framework offers a novel approach to the study of IO legitimation and, by drawing on a broad literature on legitimacy and legitimation from other disciplines, opens up new avenues for understanding the strategies that IOs use to build, sustain and defend their legitimacy. As we explain in the final section of the article, contributors to the special section engage with the AAE framework in different ways: (1) by assessing the relative explanatory strength of the three analytical perspectives; (2) by analysing their interaction and the respective scope conditions for their application; and (3) by further developing individual perspectives.

The article is made up of five substantive sections. We start by setting out what is at stake in the debate over legitimacy and legitimation in IOs (section 1). We then present a short review of the relevant literature that locates our focus on IO legitimation in the extant literature (section 2). Section 3 defines the concepts on which our analytical framework rests, and section 4 develops the three analytical perspectives on IO legitimation strategies. Finally, we summarize how our contributors use the AAE framework (section 5).

What is at stake?

There are several reasons for studying IO legitimation strategies, and these involve the concerns of both scholars and policy-makers. First, the concept of legitimacy entertains the possibility that people are not only self-interested actors but 'also moral agents, who recognize the validity of rules'.[6] The status of morality may be more precarious in the international realm due to the anarchic structure of the system, but a large constructivism-inspired literature on the impact of norms, culture and authority in world politics suggests that legitimacy concerns cannot be easily dismissed.[7] Some theorists even conceive of the international system itself 'as a set of historically changing principles of legitimacy'.[8] Even if we accept that world politics is primarily about struggles over power and interests, it is difficult to refute that both are deeply implicated by questions of legitimacy, and that attempts to manipulate legitimacy perceptions are thus constitutive to the system.

Second, legitimacy is a central element in any social order because it provides efficiency advantages *vis-à-vis* other forms of social control.[9] When the exercise of power enjoys legitimacy, compliance will be more widespread, social order more

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[6] Beetham, *The legitimation of power*, p. 27. See also Herbert C. Kelman, 'Reflections on social and psychological processes of legitimization and delegitimization', in John T. Jost and Brenda Major, eds, *The psychology of legitimacy: emerging perspectives on ideology, justice, and intergroup relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 55.

[7] Peter Katzenstein, *The culture of national security: norms and identity in world politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Alexander Wendt, *Social theory of international politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[8] Ian Clark, *Legitimacy in international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 7.

[9] Ian Hurd, 'Legitimacy and authority in international politics', *International Organization* 53: 2, 1999, pp. 379–408, https://doi.org/10.1162/002081899550913; Max Weber, *Economy and society: an outline of interpretive sociology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978).

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stable and governance less costly. A large organizational literature similarly shows that legitimate organizations are more likely to operate successfully.[10] Legitimacy is particularly important for IOs because without coercive enforcement mechanisms they rely on voluntary compliance. Since state interests may change and IOs may experience inefficiencies in improving welfare, maintaining some level of legitimacy is indispensable.[11] Studying how IOs try to build, sustain and defend their legitimacy is therefore of central scholarly and policy importance.

Third, legitimation shapes IO governance because it generates expectations for when and why the ruled should follow an IO's norms and regulations. In so doing, legitimacy claims define the basis upon which an IO may be criticized and opposed. As Weber recognized, 'the type of obedience, the type of administrative staff developed to guarantee it, the mode of exercising authority … all depend on the *type* of legitimacy claimed'.[12] If an IO claims legitimacy primarily by reference to its performance, for example, criticism of its authority that points to deficient procedures is more difficult to justify and therefore potentially less effective. Relatedly, serious discrepancies between legitimacy claims and actual behaviour may generate dissatisfaction among audiences. For example, Stefano Palestini's article in this special section shows that Mercosur's prominent claim of safeguarding democracy in member states while admitting non-democratic Venezuela resulted in charges of hypocrisy.[13] Thus, understanding how IOs claim legitimacy is part and parcel of analysing the dynamics of IO contestation.

Fourth, legitimation offers insights into the normative foundations of IOs, and such knowledge promises to improve our understanding of major fault lines in twenty-first-century world politics. Legitimation strategies rest on norms that IOs claim to represent or embody, and they therefore offer insights into the normative expectations of agents and audiences. We can thus learn how normatively coherent IOs are internally[14] and observe normative developments in specific regions as well as in global governance more broadly. Studying how IOs are legitimized at the regional level offers insights into the values that may come to shape the global level, indicating how profound contemporary challenges to the liberal international order really are. Greater awareness of the normative foundations of IOs also increases the chances of mutually beneficial long-term cooperation based on shared values.

Finally, through politicization and contestation, IOs themselves have become actors in the struggle for attention, public recognition and legitimacy. Some IOs

[10] John Dowling and Jeffrey Pfeffer, 'Organizational legitimacy: social values and organizational behavior', *Pacific Sociological Review* 18: 1, 1975, pp. 122–36, https://doi.org/10.2307/1388226; Richard Scott, *Institutions and organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001).

[11] Michael N. Barnett, 'Bringing in the new world order: liberalism, legitimacy, and the United Nations', *World Politics* 49: 4, 1997, pp. 526–51, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100008042; Hurd, 'Legitimacy and authority in international politics'.

[12] Weber, *Economy and society*, pp. 212–3 (emphasis in original).

[13] Stefano Palestini, 'The politics of legitimation in combined sanction regimes: the case of Venezuela', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 1087–107.

[14] Stephen C. Nelson and Catherine Weaver, 'Organizational culture', in Jacob Katz Cogan, Ian Hurd and Ian Johnstone, eds, *The Oxford handbook of international organizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 920–39.

have moved from operating under the veil of a 'permissive consensus' towards a 'constraining dissensus',[15] such that their claims to govern are contested and justifications of their existence and nature have become an integral part of the public debate. However, despite a comprehensive literature on the politicization and contestation of IOs,[16] the legitimation strategies of IOs remain under-theorized and under-studied. By analysing the legitimation strategies of a wide range of IOs through the prism of the proposed AAE framework, we provide policy-makers with knowledge about which strategies are available, how these are used, and which challenges policy-makers may confront in constructing legitimation strategies.

State of the art: from legitimacy beliefs to the origins of IO legitimation strategies

The concepts of legitimacy and legitimation have received considerable attention in political science, sociology, psychology and organization studies, but not as much in International Relations (IR), where a recent review diagnosed 'an enduring but marginal place'.[17] We draw on the rich tradition of work in other disciplines to structure the emerging IR debate on IO legitimation and to shift the analytical focus in two related ways: from legitimacy beliefs towards legitimation strategies, and from a focus on the audience-based origins of legitimation towards a more all-encompassing view that also captures the influence of agents and of the organizational environment.

  Much of the recent legitimacy literature in IR has focused on legitimacy beliefs. It has examined whether IOs are seen as legitimate in the eyes of their audiences and has sought to explain variation in legitimacy beliefs. This research programme emerged in Europe as the EU was shifting from a phase of 'permissive consensus' to the 'constraining dissensus' induced by the public contestation over integration that began in the 1990s.[18] This shift culminated in the rejection of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe in national referendums and induced a concomitant decline in trust—a frequently used proxy for legitimacy—leading scholars to ask about the reasons for these changes in the EU's legitimacy.[19] Beyond the EU, scholars soon diagnosed a wider backlash against globalization, IOs and the liberal international order more broadly,[20] and initiated an active research programme on

[15] Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, 'A postfunctionalist theory of European integration: from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus', *British Journal of Political Science* 39: 1, 2009, pp. 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123408000409.

[16] Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt, 'Why parties politicise international institutions: on globalisation backlash and authority contestation', *Review of International Political Economy* 21: 6, 2014, pp. 1275–312, https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2013.839463; Zürn, *A theory of global governance*.

[17] Tallberg and Zürn, 'The legitimacy and legitimation of international organizations', p. 584.

[18] Hooghe and Marks, 'A postfunctionalist theory of European integration'.

[19] Klaus Armingeon and Besir Ceka, 'The loss of trust in the European Union during the great recession since 2007: the role of heuristics from the national political system', *European Union Politics* 15: 1, 2014, pp. 82–107, https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116513495595; for an overview, see Sara B. Hobolt and Catherine E. de Vries, 'Public support for European integration', *Annual Review of Political Science* 19: 1, 2016, pp. 413–32, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-042214-044157.

[20] Tanja A. Börzel and Michael Zürn, 'Contestations of the liberal international order: from liberal multilater-

the legitimacy of IOs.[21] This research shows convincingly that the liberal international order is facing legitimacy challenges, both from within its western core and from new powers from without, and it has identified an important set of reasons why IOs, as one central pillar, vary in their legitimacy. However, it tells us little about how IOs react to such legitimacy challenges, and why they do so in different ways.

Thus, our first analytical move is to shift the research agenda from legitimacy beliefs towards the strategies by with which IOs seek to enhance their legitimacy. This move implies a procedurally oriented view that examines how IOs actively build their legitimacy, and how they become active participants in 'legitimation contests'[22] or 'battles for legitimacy'.[23] How legitimacy is established, is contested and may change is a staple theme in the organizational literature, but it has received relatively short shrift in the IO legitimacy literature. Following Weber, political science has generally discussed legitimacy in relation to political authority and has therefore focused attention primarily on the state.[24] Organizational theorists, in contrast, have examined a variety of organizational forms such as private businesses, public agencies and NGOs, based on the premise that '[organizations] require legitimacy to attract constituents' support'.[25] It follows that they 'must make ongoing efforts to create and maintain organizational legitimacy',[26] and we seek to examine how one specific type—IOs—does so.

Whereas the work on IOs tends to start from a stipulated 'authority–legitimacy link'—that is, the premise that only IOs with authority have incentives to engage in legitimation[27]—we follow the organizational literature's more permissive analytical foundation, which expects IOs as one organizational form to strive to acquire and to manage their legitimacy, not least in response to growing politicization and contestation.[28] We therefore cast our empirical net more widely and examine the legitimation strategies of diverse IOs that transcend the existing

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    alism to postnational liberalism', *International Organization* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 282–305, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000570.

[21] Hans Agné, Lisa M. Dellmuth and Jonas Tallberg, 'Does stakeholder involvement foster democratic legitimacy in international organizations? An empirical assessment of a normative theory', *The Review of International Organizations* 10: 4, 2015, pp. 465–88, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-014-9212-6; Lisa M. Dellmuth, Jan Aart Scholte and Jonas Tallberg, 'Institutional sources of legitimacy for international organisations: beyond procedure versus performance', *Review of International Studies* 45: 4, 2019, pp. 627–46, https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021051900007X.

[22] Klaus Dingwerth, Antonia Witt, Ina Lehmann, Ellen Reichel and Tobias Weise, eds, *International organizations under pressure: legitimating global governance in challenging times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 29.

[23] Daniel F. Wajner, '"Battling" for legitimacy: analyzing performative contests in the Gaza Flotilla paradigmatic case', *International Studies Quarterly* 63: 4, 2019, pp. 1035–50 at p. 1036, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqz047.

[24] Beetham, *The legitimation of power*; David Easton, *A systems analysis of political life* (New York: John Wiley, 1965).

[25] Blake E. Ashforth and Barrie W. Gibbs, 'The double-edge of organizational legitimation', *Organization Science* 1: 2, 1990, pp. 177–94 at p. 177, https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1.2.177.

[26] Dana Landau, Israel Drori and Siri Terjesen, 'Multiple legitimacy narratives and planned organizational change', *Human Relations* 67: 11, 2014, pp. 1321–45 at p. 1322, https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726713517403.

[27] Tallberg and Zürn, 'The legitimacy and legitimation of international organizations'; Zürn, *A theory of global governance*.

[28] Felix Anderl et al., eds, *Rule and resistance beyond the nation state: contestation, escalation, exit* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Catia Gregoratti and Anders Uhlin, 'Civil society protest and the (de) legitimation of global governance institutions', in Jonas Tallberg, Karin Bäckstrand and Jan Aart Scholte, eds, *Legitimacy in global governance: sources, processes and consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 134–52.

literature's focus on a few prominent IOs such as the EU, the UN, the World Bank and the WTO.[29]

Our second analytical move is to shift from a focus on audience-driven legitimation towards a broader view that also captures the agent- and environment-based origins of legitimation strategies. Despite a growing recognition that a more diversified set of actors is relevant to understanding legitimation processes, scholarship on IO legitimacy and legitimation remains wedded to a focus on audiences and their normative demands as the primary origin of legitimation strategies. This is a plausible perspective, yet it neglects other potential origins. In this special section, we aim to structure and broaden the debate about the origins of IO legitimation strategies by developing two additional perspectives that emphasize IO agents' own normative beliefs and those dominant in an IO's organizational environment. Our proposed AAE framework offers a more balanced analytical approach and enables us to analyse influence in the core relationship between agents and audiences, not only as a unidirectional force flowing from audiences to agents but also as a multidirectional force—flowing from agents towards audiences and also from an IO's environment towards both agents and audiences. Before elaborating on these three analytical perspectives, we outline the basic concepts on which our framework rests.

Conceptualizing IO legitimation: agents, audiences and strategies

The politics of legitimation revolve around agents' attempts to shape audiences' legitimacy beliefs. In the tradition of Weber, we define legitimacy as audiences' perception that an IO is normatively appropriate.[30] The concept captures a 'reservoir of diffuse support'[31] that is rooted not in the satisfaction of audiences' material self-interests but in their perception that the IO accords with their norms of appropriate behaviour.[32] Legitimation denotes deliberate attempts on the part of IO agents to enhance an IO's legitimacy. Unlike legitimacy perceptions, legitimation is an observable activity that directs attention to agents, audiences and strategies.

Agents of legitimation are the actors that try to shape audiences' perception of legitimacy by constructing legitimation strategies, and we conceive of them as IO representatives. We consider two groups of actors as agents: IO bureaucracies and officials of member states. As the foremost representatives of an IO's agency,

[29] Dominika Biegoń, 'Specifying the arena of possibilities: post-structuralist narrative analysis and the European Commission's legitimation strategies', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 51: 2, 2013, pp. 194–211, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2012.02310.x; Martin Binder and Monika Heupel, 'The legitimacy of the UN Security Council: evidence from recent General Assembly debates', *International Studies Quarterly* 59: 2, 2015, pp. 238–50, https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12134; Alexander Kentikelenis and Erik Voeten, 'Legitimacy challenges to the liberal world order: evidence from United Nations speeches, 1970–2018', *The Review of International Organizations* 16: 1, 2021, pp. 721–54, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-020-09404-y.
[30] Barnett, 'Bringing in the new world order'.
[31] Easton, *A systems analysis of political life*, p. 274.
[32] Beetham, *The legitimation of power*; Dowling and Pfeffer, 'Organizational legitimacy'; Tobias Lenz and Lora Anne Viola, 'Legitimacy and institutional change in international organisations: a cognitive approach', *Review of International Studies* 43: 5, 2017, pp. 939–61, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210517000201.

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bureaucracies have an inherent interest in an IO's vitality and, as the organizational literature insists, 'one of the principal functions of persons on the institutional level is to legitimate the organization'.[33] Following this idea, much literature on IO legitimation has focused on bureaucracies as important agents of legitimation.[34] Recently, scholars have also started to emphasize the role of member states in this capacity. According to Dominik Zaum, in most IOs 'the most important actors engaging in legitimation efforts are not the supranational bureaucracies, but member states'.[35] As the collective principals, member states also have a general interest in legitimizing their IO, notwithstanding the fact that they sometimes act as critics.[36] The contributions to this special section focus on these two groups as IO representatives without denying that other actors—such as civil society actors or external partners—may also seek to shape an audience's legitimacy beliefs.[37]

Audiences are the actors who grant or withdraw legitimacy, and they are therefore 'the intended recipients of [agents'] legitimation claims'.[38] Audiences serve as addressees because agents consider them to be relevant to the functioning of the IO; they can bolster or undermine an IO's operations. As Alice Ba further elaborates in her article in the special section of this issue, we distinguish between internal and external audiences.[39] Internal audiences are those addressees of legitimation that are subject to an IO's governance. They encompass the member states and a variety of social groups living within them, including non-state actors, the wider public and individual citizens. As various contributions to the special section show, member states serve a dual role in many IOs and act both as agents of legitimation and the target of an IO bureaucracy's legitimation strategies because they are the ones who implement IO decisions. Similarly, parts of the IO bureaucracy may also count among the internal audiences of an IO's legitimation strategies, as Sarah von Billerbeck shows.[40] External audiences, on the other hand, are those addressees of legitimation that are not among the governance targets of an IO. These may include non-member states and the international commu-

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[33] Dowling and Pfeffer, 'Organizational legitimacy', p. 123.

[34] Jennifer Gronau and Henning Schmidtke, 'The quest for legitimacy in world politics: international institutions' legitimation strategies', *Review of International Studies* 42: 3, 2016, pp. 535–57, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210515000492; Jonathan Symons, 'The legitimation of international organisations: examining the identity of the communities that grant legitimacy', *Review of International Studies* 37: 5, 2011, pp. 2557–83, https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021051000166X.

[35] Dominik Zaum, 'Legitimacy', in Katz Cogan, Hurd and Johnstone, eds, *The Oxford handbook of international organizations*, pp. 1107–25.

[36] Karin Bäckstrand and Fredrik Söderbaum, 'Legitimation and delegitimation in global governance: discursive, institutional, and behavioural practices', in Tallberg, Bäckstrand and Aart Scholte, eds, *Legitimacy in global governance*, pp. 101–18.

[37] In informal IOs or those without a (large) secretariat, the main legitimation agents are officials of member states.

[38] Magdalena Bexell, Kristina Jönsson and Nora Stappert, 'Whose legitimacy beliefs count? Targeted audiences in global governance legitimation processes', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 24: 2, 2021, pp. 483–508 at p. 487, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-020-00199-4.

[39] Alice Ba, 'Diversification's legitimation challenges: ASEAN and its Myanmar predicament', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 1063–85.

[40] Sarah von Billerbeck, 'Organizational narratives and self-legitimation in international organizations', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 963–81.

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nity.[41] Given 'a multitude of possible audiences',[42] the authors have been invited to specify other social groups that serve as targets of an IO's legitimation efforts.

In line with previous research, we conceive of IO legitimation as a strategic activity through which IO agents seek to find the most efficient way of enhancing audiences' belief in the legitimacy of an IO; agents treat legitimacy as 'a manipulable resource' which they use in the pursuit of their goals,[43] and *strategies* are the instruments that agents use to try to shape it. We distinguish between three types of strategy: discursive, institutional and behavioural.[44] *Discursive* legitimation strategies entail the making of public legitimacy claims and other communicative messages. We define a legitimacy claim as a public proposition that an IO conforms to or embodies a specific norm.[45] Whereas much of the literature focuses on claims that engage performance norms (efficiency, effectiveness and so on) and democratic procedures, the contributions in this special section show that claims actually cover a broader range of issues such as identity and communitarian norms.[46] *Institutional* strategies involve the creation of new institutions or changes to existing institutions within an IO in order to strengthen its legitimacy, and *behavioural* strategies are performative practices such as symbols and rituals or ranking exercises, performance reviews, and external partner compacts intended to bolster legitimacy.[47] Legitimacy claims are important for institutional and behavioural strategies as well, because they give meaning to these strategies and make them recognizable as strategies of legitimation. Some of the contributions focus on discursive legitimation strategies, whereas others consider institutional or behavioural strategies.

Origins of IO legitimation strategies: the AAE framework

How do these building blocks—agents, audiences and strategies—hang together? Our analytical framework rests on the dynamic interaction between IO *agents* and *audiences*, which is embedded in a wider organizational *environment*—hence, the AAE framework (figure 1). It starts from a strategic understanding of legitimation: strategic agents are sensitive to, and seek to shape, audiences' legitimacy beliefs by constructing legitimation strategies because these affect an IO's functioning,

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[41] We treat other IOs as part of the environment, not as an external audience, because they rarely voice explicit normative demands *vis-à-vis* their peers. Therefore, their influence operates mainly through the isomorphic dynamics described as part of the environment-based perspective.

[42] Dingwerth et al., eds, *International organizations under pressure*, p. 34.

[43] Mark C. Suchman, 'Managing legitimacy: strategic and institutional approaches', *The Academy of Management Review* 20: 3, 1995, pp. 571–610 at p. 576, https://doi.org/10.2307/258788.

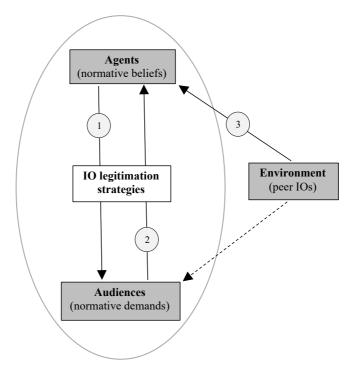[44] Bäckstrand and Söderbaum, 'Legitimation and delegitimation in global governance'.

[45] See also Michael Saward, 'The representative claim', *Contemporary Political Theory* 5, 2006, pp. 297–318, https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300234.

[46] Tobias Lenz and Henning Schmidtke, 'Agents, audiences and peers: why international organizations diversify their legitimation discourse', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 921–40; Kilian Spandler and Fredrik Söderbaum, 'Populist (de)legitimation of international organizations', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 899–920.

[47] Bäckstrand and Söderbaum, 'Legitimation and delegitimation in global governance'. Regarding institutional strategies, also see Dominik Zaum, ed., *Legitimating international organizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Jack Corbett, Xu Yi-Chong and Patrick Weller, *International organizations and small states: participation, legitimacy and vulnerability* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).

placing agents and audiences in a dynamic relationship with each other. This relationship is embedded in a wider organizational environment, which may itself shape the interaction between agents and audiences by providing standards of legitimacy that inform the beliefs and activities of both actors. For our present purposes, we conceive of the environment narrowly as comprising both other IOs that are also pursuing legitimation goals and the overlap that exists among them in terms of membership and policy scope.[48]

Figure 1: AAE framework of strategic legitimation in international organizations

Note: The numbers refer to the three analytical perspectives: (1) agent-based; (2) audience-based; (3) environment-based.

The AAE framework generates three distinct origins of IO legitimation strategies: (1) agents' normative beliefs; (2) audiences' normative demands; and (3) other IOs in an organization's environment. While we develop these perspectives as alternative explanations for the origin of IO legitimation strategies, they may

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[48] Yoram Haftel and Tobias Lenz, 'Measuring institutional overlap in global governance', *The Review of International Organizations* 17: 2, 2022, pp. 323–47, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-021-09415-3. One may, of course, conceptualize the organizational environment more broadly—for example, by focusing on external threats or crises as shapers of IO legitimation strategies—but we focus on other IOs because this is the analytical focus of some of the articles in this special section. We thank one reviewer for encouraging us to clarify this point.

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interact in various ways. We address such interactions in the next section. Below, we develop each of these perspectives in terms of their basic assumptions, their analytical core and the main challenges of legitimation, and explain how strategic action enters into the construction of legitimation in each case, starting with the conventional audience-based perspective. Table 1 provides an overview.

Table 1: Three analytical perspectives on legitimation strategies of international organizations

	(1) Agent–based	*(2) Audience–based*	*(3) Environment–based*
Origin of legitimation strategies	Agent's normative beliefs	Audiences' normative demands	Peer organizations' legitimation strategies
Basic assumptions	Agents are morally active and strategic actors; audiences are morally receptive actors; environment is reduced to socializing environment of agents	Audiences are active moral actors; agents are instrumentally responsive actors; environment is reduced to audiences	Organizational environment constrains and constitutes agents and audiences and structures their interaction; it involves other IOs
Analytical core	Relationship between agents and audiences: How agents acquire, negotiate and seek to persuade audiences of their own normative beliefs	Relationship between audiences and agents: How agents follow audiences' normative demands	Relationship between agents (and audiences) and the organizational environment: How agents select among and frame peer organizations' legitimation strategies
Main strategic challenges	Persuasion of relevant IO audiences as to the validity and relevance of agents' beliefs for an IO Overcoming normative disagreement among agents	Definition of relevant audiences Balancing of audiences' potentially competing or irreconcilable normative demands	Identification of relevant and appropriate organizational environments and their dominant norms and legitimation strategies

Tobias Lenz and Fredrik Söderbaum

Audience-based perspective: audiences' normative demands

The conventional perspective focuses on the normative demands voiced by an IO's core audiences. It posits that legitimation strategies reflect those norms that relevant audiences expect the IO to align with.[49]

This audience-based perspective rests on distinct *assumptions* about the nature of audiences, agents and the organizational environment. Audiences are seen as moral actors, who not only passively judge an IO on the extent to which it conforms to their preferred and exogenously given standards of appropriateness but who also actively demand that an IO aligns with those standards. Thus, audiences are active shapers rather than primarily recipients of agents' legitimation strategies. Agents, in contrast, are depicted as strategic actors whose instrumental interest in enhancing an IO's legitimacy leads them to listen to, and act upon, the normative demands that relevant audiences voice. Agents are seen as responsive recipients of normative demands, and their own agency is restricted to prioritizing audiences' demands and to constructing legitimation strategies on this basis. Thus, they serve primarily as 'transmission belts' between audiences' demands and legitimation strategies. The organizational environment, in turn, is reduced to an IO's audiences and their normative demands; it drops from view as an *independent* source of legitimation strategies.

The *analytical core* of this perspective is the dynamic relationship between active moral audiences and instrumentally responsive agents, and this perspective analyses how agents follow the normative demands of relevant audiences. It starts from the norms held by audiences, on whose perception the success of agents' legitimation strategies depends. This perspective reasons that, given audiences' central role in successful legitimation, strategic agents have incentives to identify the norms that audiences use in the assessments of an IO's legitimacy, and to strategically construct legitimation practices that are rooted in these norms.[50] This is what Mark Suchman describes as 'efforts to conform to the dictates of pre-existing audiences within the organization's current environment'.[51] The way in which this perspective conceives of the relationship between agents and audiences is analogous to the relationship between suppliers and consumers in private markets. Suppliers seek to maximize profits by catering to consumers' anticipated and actual demand. They are successful to the extent that they meet consumers' demand. In this audience-based perspective, too, demand dictates supply.

Identifying the norms that audiences use in their assessment of an IO's legitimacy requires a significant amount of information, and agents therefore rely on shortcuts.[52] Explicit normative demands, often in the form of criticism, protest

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[49] Gronau and Schmidtke, 'The quest for legitimacy'; Lenz and Viola, 'Legitimacy and institutional change'; Sasikumar S. Sundaram, 'Strategic legitimation through rhetorical dissociation in International Relations', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6: 2, 2021, pp. 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa001.

[50] Ashforth and Gibbs, 'The double-edge of organizational legitimation'; Dowling and Pfeffer, 'Organizational legitimacy'.

[51] Suchman, 'Managing legitimacy', p. 587.

[52] Lenz and Viola, 'Legitimacy and institutional change'.

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or resistance,[53] serve this function. After all, the legitimacy of an IO is 'rarely uncontested; institutions face opposition and are confronted with attempts geared towards their delegitimation'.[54] For example, during the protests against the WTO in Seattle in 1999, banners that showed the terms 'WTO' and 'democracy' underlain by arrows pointing in opposite directions indicated that many NGOs deemed the WTO to be insufficiently democratic.[55] Such delegitimation efforts signal to agents that an IO's legitimacy may be in decline, and agents construct legitimation strategies to address and mitigate criticism or dissatisfaction. The audience-based perspective thus captures an important pathway through which elites remain responsive to constituents' demands more broadly.[56]

Constructing legitimation strategies on the basis of audiences' normative demands involves a series of *strategic challenges*. As noted, audiences are rarely a homogeneous group, and one challenge therefore lies in prioritizing the various demands. Not all audiences are equally important to the functioning of an IO, and strategic agents attend first to those demands that they expect to be most relevant.[57] While the volume and visibility of audiences' demands may be a useful shortcut for relevance, it is far from clear that the most vocal critics are also the most relevant ones for an IO's legitimacy. The dynamic of contemporary debates on social media illustrates this point. Moreover, the increasing diversification of potentially relevant audiences, which now variously include civil society organizations, IO bureaucracies, expert communities, international cooperation partners and an increasingly attentive public,[58] poses informational challenges for agents in terms of which audiences the legitimacy of an IO actually relies upon—and upon whose norms legitimation strategies should be based. Diversification also enhances the probability that audiences will differ with regard to the norms that they deem important, further complicating successful legitimation. As Steven Bernstein notes, 'The coherence or incoherence of that community matters, since incoherence or strong normative contestation among groups within a legitimating community make establishing clear requirements for legitimacy difficult.'[59] Moreover, different audiences may require different legitimation strategies to be addressed successfully, raising the prospect of unintended interaction effects between strategies. At best, this leads to a proliferation of legitimation strategies; at worst, these strategies conflict with each other, undermining rather than enhancing IO legitimacy.[60]

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[53] Anderl et al., *Rule and resistance beyond the nation state*; Gregoratti and Uhlin, 'Civil society protest'.

[54] Berthold Rittberger and Philipp Schroeder, 'The legitimacy of regional institutions', in Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, eds, *The Oxford handbook of comparative regionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 586; see also Christopher Daase and Nicole Deitelhoff, 'Opposition and dissidence: two modes of resistance against international rule', *Journal of International Political Theory* 15: 1, 2019, pp. 11–30, , https://doi.org/10.1177/1755088218808312

[55] Dingwerth et al., *International organizations under pressure*, pp. 80–81.

[56] See James A. Stimson, Michael B. Mackuen and Robert S. Erikson, 'Dynamic representation', *American Political Science Review* 89: 3, 1995, pp. 543–65, https://doi.org/10.2307/2082973.

[57] Symons, 'The legitimation of international organisations'.

[58] Bexell et al., 'Whose legitimacy beliefs count?'. See also Ba, 'Diversification's legitimation challenges' and von Billerbeck, 'Organizational narratives and self-legitimation in international organizations'.

[59] Steven Bernstein, 'Legitimacy in intergovernmental and non-state global governance', *Review of International Political Economy* 18: 1, 2011, pp. 17–51 at p. 21, https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290903173087.

[60] Bexell et al., 'Whose legitimacy beliefs count?'; see also Ashforth and Gibbs, 'The double-edge of organiza-

Finally, agents need to decide *how* to translate audiences' demands into legitimation strategies. While normative demands constrain agents' choices, legitimation generally 'is multiply realizable'.[61] This challenge is particularly acute when audiences ask IOs to reflect particular norms rather than concrete institutions and behaviours. For example, calls for more participation by civil society actors may be addressed by 'speaking the language of democracy',[62] holding regular exchanges with civil society,[63] or institutionalizing actors' participation in IO decision-making.[64] Translating audience demands also involves finding the right balance between discursive, institutional and behavioural legitimation strategies.[65] Whereas a simple change in discourse may be sufficient in some circumstances, more profound institutional and/or behavioural change may be required in others. In sum, instrumentally responsive agents face a series of strategic choices in the construction of legitimation strategies that become more challenging as the relevant audiences' normative demands diversify.

Agent-based perspective: IO agents' normative beliefs

A second perspective locates the origin of legitimation strategies in agents' own normative beliefs. It posits that legitimation reflects a commitment on the part of IO agents to specific norms, and that these agents seek to persuade relevant audiences of the validity and relevance of these norms for the IO in question.

The agent-based perspective's *basic assumptions* about the nature of agents, audiences and the organizational environment differ to some extent from those of the audience-based perspective. Both perspectives depict audiences as moral actors who assess an IO's legitimacy on the basis of their preferred standards of appropriateness. However, in the case of the agent-based perspective, the norms that audiences use to assess an IO's legitimacy are not stable or fixed, but can instead be altered as a result of agents' efforts at persuasion. Thus, audiences are assumed to be morally receptive to the normative beliefs that agents may espouse. Agents are seen as *both* strategic and moral actors who not only aim to find the most efficient way to enhance the legitimacy beliefs of relevant audiences (strategic) but also construct legitimation strategies on the basis of their own normative beliefs (moral). This basic premise is shared with constructivist analyses of IR—which see actors as acting upon ideas, norms and identities[66]—and it views agents, rather than audiences, as the core moral actors in understanding IO legitimation strategies. Akin to the audience-

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tional legitimation'.

[61] Lenz and Viola, 'Legitimacy and institutional change', p. 946.

[62] Klaus Dingwerth, Henning Schmidtke and Tobias Weise, 'The rise of democratic legitimation: why international organizations speak the language of democracy', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26: 3, 2020, pp. 714–41, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066119882488.

[63] Melanie Coni-Zimmer, Nicole Deitelhoff and Diane Schumann, 'The path of least resistance: why international institutions maintain dialogue forums', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 941–61.

[64] Jonas Tallberg, Thomas Sommerer, Theresa Squatrito and Christer Jönsson, *The opening up of international organizations: transnational access in global governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[65] Bäckstrand and Söderbaum, 'Legitimation and delegitimation in global governance'.

[66] Jeffrey T. Checkel, 'The constructive turn in International Relations theory', *World Politics* 50: 2, 1998, pp. 324–48, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100008133; Wendt, *Social theory of international politics*.

based perspective, the agent-based perspective tends to reduce the organizational environment to the environment in which agents acquire their normative beliefs, and does not view it as an independent source of legitimation strategies.

The dynamic relationship between morally active agents and receptive audiences constitutes the *analytical core* of this perspective. This perspective examines how agents acquire, negotiate and seek to persuade audiences of their own normative beliefs, on the basis of which they construct IO legitimation strategies. We are neutral as to whether agents acquire their normative beliefs through processes of political socialization or choose them strategically.[67] The key point is that agents' own normative beliefs may shape IO legitimation strategies because they provide reasons for action that agents wish to see reflected in their own behaviour.[68] The way in which political actors seek to realize their normative beliefs is strategic. Since beliefs do not dictate a specific behaviour, a single set of beliefs may lead agents to pursue those legitimation strategies that are most likely to be effective in shaping audiences' legitimacy beliefs.[69] Organizational theorists recognize the 'purposeful use of ideological rhetoric' in the legitimation of organizations.[70] Similarly, literatures on elite cueing, political framing and social movements show that political actors choose cues and frames strategically to maximize their impact.[71] Agents may also seek to contest or even to hide a legitimacy problem by misrepresenting or concealing information that is necessary for audiences to assess an IO's legitimacy.[72] Moreover, agents act strategically in choosing the ways and means to persuade audiences of the norms that inform their legitimation strategies.[73] This involves a choice between the various types of legitimation strategy. For example, elites may 'test the waters' with a particular discursive strategy before employing more costly institutional and behavioural strategies. Similarly, they may seek to direct a legitimation strategy at those audience groups that are most likely to be persuaded by the norms that underpin them.

The primary *strategic challenge* of successful IO legitimation, then, is one of effective leadership. Agents need to persuade relevant audiences of not only the general validity of their own normative beliefs, but also their relevance to the IO

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[67] For different perspectives, see Jeffrey T. Checkel, 'International institutions and socialization in Europe: introduction and framework', *International Organization* 59: 4, 2005, pp. 801–26, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818305050289; Erik Voeten, *Ideology and international institutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[68] Andreas Müller, *Constructing practical reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[69] Compatible with this perspective is the idea that IO agents may not just shape audiences' norms but themselves 'construct' audiences. See Stephan Hensell, 'Getting cozy, or how the European Commission produces legitimacy in the EU', *International Studies Perspectives* 23: 2, 2022, pp. 151–68, https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekab011.

[70] Mairi Maclean, Charles Harvey, Roy Suddaby and Kevin O'Gorman, 'Political ideology and the discursive construction of the multinational hotel industry', *Human Relations* 71: 6, 2018, pp. 766–95 at p. 767, https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726717718919. See also Roy Suddaby and Royston Greenwood, 'Rhetorical strategies of legitimacy', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 50: 1, 2005, pp. 35–67, https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2005.50.1.35.

[71] Robert Benford and David A. Snow, 'Framing processes and social movements: an overview and assessment', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 26, 2000, pp. 611–39, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611; John G. Bullock, 'Elite influence on public opinion in an informed electorate', *American Political Science Review* 105: 3, 2011, pp. 496–515, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055411000165.

[72] Lenz and Viola, 'Legitimacy and institutional change', p. 959.

[73] Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Benjamin Kienzle, 'Legitimation strategies of informal groups of states: the case of the E3 directoire in the nuclear negotiations with Iran', *Cooperation and Conflict* 55: 3, 2020, pp. 388–405, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836720907630.

in question. The literature shows that the values of political elites and citizens often deviate substantially,[74] and this may extend to the value difference between agents and audiences. Yet research on charismatic and transformational leadership within organizations shows that leaders who act upon goals and values that they themselves believe in possess, in principle, a key prerequisite for successful leadership.[75] In the public domain, elite communication has been shown to have a significant effect on citizens' legitimacy beliefs,[76] giving elites potentially powerful 'tools' to overcome the challenge.

Moreover, agents contend with the challenge of negotiating, and collectively acting upon, potentially conflicting normative beliefs among themselves. Similarly to audiences, agents themselves rarely form a normatively homogeneous group: rather, they are likely to differ in terms of the normative beliefs they profess. Normative struggles may be particularly fierce because compromise is often more difficult to achieve when compared to a context in which actors negotiate only on the basis of their material self-interests, and this challenge may be particularly acute in the current global political climate, in which political polarization appears to be on the rise in many societies.[77] Yet, 'agents thus disagreeing among themselves face the need to identify shared values on the basis of which to structure *just institutions*'[78] and to construct strategies that effectively appeal to audiences. Therefore, the question of how to combine, trade off and reassemble different normative beliefs amongst IO agents is another challenge of successful legitimation from the agent-based perspective. Finally, the challenge for agents of needing to determine the relevance of diverse audiences, which the audience-based perspective entails, also applies to the agent-based perspective.

Environment-based perspective: peer IOs' legitimation strategies

A third perspective on IO legitimation strategies shifts the focus from 'internal' origins associated with agents and audiences towards the organizational environment. While one may conceive of the organizational environment in different ways, our focus is on the legitimation strategies used by other IOs that are prevalent in an IO's environment and which induce isomorphic dynamics—a focus that is prominent in the organizational literature.[79]

The *basic assumptions* of this perspective differ from those of both the agent-based and the audience-based perspective. The environment-based perspective

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[74] See, for example, Ursula van Beeck, ed., *Democracy under scrutiny: elites, citizens, cultures* (Opladen & Farmington Hills, MI: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2010).

[75] Bernard M. Bass, *Leadership and performance beyond expectations* (New York: Free Press, 1985).

[76] Lisa M. Dellmuth and Jonas Tallberg, 'Elite communication and the popular legitimacy of international organizations', *British Journal of Political Science* 51: 3, 2021, pp. 1292–313, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123419000620.

[77] Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, eds, *Democracies divided: the global challenge of political polarization* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019).

[78] Emanuela Ceva and Gideon Calder, 'Values, diversity and the justification of EU institutions', *Political Studies* 57: 4, 2009, p. 829 (emphasis in original), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2009.00792.x.

[79] John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, 'Institutionalized organizations: formal structure as myth and ceremony', *American Journal of Sociology* 83: 2, 1977, pp. 340–63, https://doi.org/10.1086/226550; Scott, *Institutions and organizations*; Suchman, 'Managing legitimacy'.

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assumes that agents and audiences are heavily constrained, and even constituted, by the environment in which they operate. They construct legitimation strategies and assess an IO's legitimacy not by drawing on their own normative beliefs (or those of the respective other) but through observation of their organizational environment and the IOs operating within it; the norms of agents and audiences are endogenous to the organizational environment in which they operate. Whereas the audience- and agent-based perspectives depict IOs as self-contained and self-referential entities in which successful legitimation hinges on the alignment between agents' strategies and audiences' demands, the environment-based perspective rests on the premise of other-referentiality, according to which major legitimacy benefits derive from alignment between an IO and other IOs in its external environment.[80] The conceptual distinction between agents and audiences is weakened because organizational environments structure actors within them in similar ways. As Suchman explains, 'In a strong and constraining symbolic environment, a manager's decisions are often constructed by the same belief systems that determine audience reactions'.[81] In this sense, this perspective puts less emphasis on moral agency, on the part of either agents or audiences, and focuses instead on structural constraints on actors resulting from their organizational environment.

This perspective, therefore, accords *analytical primacy* to the nature of an IO's environment and the embeddedness of actors within it.[82] It analyses how organizational environments generate pressure on agents to follow dominant templates in the construction of legitimation strategies, which, in turn, are also regarded as legitimate by audiences. Hence, the perspective starts from environments, not actors, and what organizational theorists term an organizational field. Organizational fields—understood as 'those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life'[83]—structure the norms that political actors hold, and thereby shape legitimation strategies. Especially in dense and well-established organizational fields, it is rational for actors to adopt dominant strategies in order to boost their legitimacy.[84] Research in a diverse range of fields shows that the mere prevalence of a discourse or organizational form, and therefore actors' familiarity with it, lends legitimacy to it.[85] As homogeneity grows,

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[80] Tobias Lenz, Alexandr Burilkov and Lora Anne Viola, 'Legitimacy and the cognitive sources of international institutional change: the case of regional parliamentarization', *International Studies Quarterly* 63: 4, 2019, pp. 1094–107, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqz051.

[81] Suchman, 'Managing legitimacy', p. 576.

[82] This is shared with organizational ecology work, which focuses, however, on populations of organizations that are dependent on similar resources. See Michael T. Hannan and Glenn R. Carroll, *Dynamics of organizational populations: density, legitimation and competition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Kenneth W. Abbott, Jessica F. Green and Robert O. Keohane, 'Organizational ecology and institutional change in global governance', *International Organization* 70: 2, 2016, pp. 247–77, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818315000338.

[83] Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, 'The iron cage revisited: institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields', *American Sociological Review* 48: 2, 1983, pp. 147–60 at p. 148, https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101. Organizational ecology also highlights density, but it focuses on the inverse relationship between density and the growth of a population, not the behaviour of individual units *per se*. See Hannan and Carroll, *Dynamics of organizational populations*, pp. 39–41; Abbott, Green and Keohane, 'Organizational ecology', pp. 259–60.

[84] DiMaggio and Powell, 'The iron cage revisited', p. 147.

[85] Robert B. Zajonc, 'Attitudinal effects of mere exposure', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 9: 2, 1968, pp. 1–27, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0025848; Lenz and Viola, 'Legitimacy and institutional change'.

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deviant practices become increasingly difficult to justify, and the costs associated with their retention grow. Conversely, the adoption of new norms and practices becomes easier to justify, and change costs drop. For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) established a human rights body as human rights norms rose to prominence after the Cold War, even though the organization had previously rejected human rights as culturally alien.[86] This dynamic is often referred to as isomorphism—that is, a process of increasing homogenization, or a decrease in variability between organizations.[87]

Isomorphic pressures may operate both at the level of the norms that audiences apply in their legitimacy assessments and at the level of strategies that agents construct to enhance legitimacy beliefs. Regarding the former, certain norms may rise to dominance in the assessment of an IOs' legitimacy across diverse contexts, and this will lead to increasing similarity in the legitimation practices that strategic agents construct. For example, research shows that the rising prominence of liberal norms such as democracy, participation and transparency in the 1990s induced the proliferation of participatory institutional mechanisms in IOs.[88] At the same time, agents may emulate the legitimation strategies of other IOs in an attempt to 'borrow' legitimacy.[89] Such a logic has been theorized, for example, with reference to the establishment of parliamentary institutions in IOs.[90]

The origin of isomorphic pressures may be located at different levels of analysis. Especially in the early phases of the constitution of an organizational field, reference organizations are important in inducing isomorphism. Here, other organizations in the field emulate the discourses and practices of organizations that are seen as particularly successful and prominent.[91] As organizational fields mature, standards of legitimacy develop independently of individual referent organizations and come to operate through more diffuse isomorphic pressures at the level of the organizational field as a whole[92]—a process that institutional theorists call structuration. Thus, individual IO legitimation strategies may be the result of certain legitimation strategies being widely valued within a broader organizational environment; they may come to be adopted primarily as a result of 'ceremonial demands'.[93]

[86] Avery Poole, '"The world is outraged": legitimacy in the making of the ASEAN human rights body', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 37: 3, 2015, pp. 355–80, https://doi.org/10.1355/cs37-3b.

[87] DiMaggio and Powell, 'The iron cage revisited'.

[88] Alexandru Grigorescu, *Democratic intergovernmental organizations? Normative pressures and decision-making rules* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Thomas Sommerer and Jonas Tallberg, 'Diffusion across international organizations: connectivity and convergence', *International Organization* 73: 2, 2019, pp. 399–433, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818318000450.

[89] Joseph MacKay, 'Legitimation strategies in international hierarchies', *International Studies Quarterly* 63: 3, 2019, pp. 717–25, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqz038.

[90] Lenz et al., 'Legitimacy and the cognitive sources of international institutional change'; Frank Schimmelfennig et al., *The rise of international parliaments: strategic legitimation in international organizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[91] DiMaggio and Powell, 'The iron cage revisited', p. 151; Heather Haveman, 'Follow the leader: mimetic isomorphism and entry into new markets', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38, 1993, pp. 593–627, https://doi.org/10.2307/2393338.

[92] Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization* 52: 4, 1998, pp. 887–917, https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550789.

[93] Meyer and Rowan, 'Institutionalized organizations', p. 353.

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The core *strategic challenge* of legitimation according to the isomorphic perspective is to identify and decipher signals from relevant organizational environments when the latter are less than fully structured. There may be contestation within IOs—among different agents and between agents and relevant audiences—over which other IOs should serve as relevant referents in the construction of legitimation strategies. For example, African Union (AU) representatives may disagree over whether the legitimation strategies of another general purpose IO (such as the EU) or of another economic organization (such as the WTO) may be more relevant in the construction of AU legitimation strategies. When the signals from an organization's environment regarding widely accepted forms of legitimation are weak, IO policy-makers need to interpret these signals and convince audiences of the relevance of some environmental legitimation practices over others.

The AAE framework in action: relative explanatory power, interactions and extensions of the three analytical perspectives

The contributors to this special section use and further develop the AAE framework in different ways, and in this final section we summarize their respective conceptual contributions. We distinguish between three forms.

A first set of articles assesses the relative explanatory strength of the three analytical perspectives that comprise the AAE framework. Thus, it treats them as theoretically distinct and analytically rival (yet potentially empirically complementary) lenses with which to examine the origin of IO legitimation strategies. A core contribution of this set of articles is to operationalize the three perspectives for empirical analysis. Lenz and Schmidtke study the diversity of norm-based justifications in the public communication of 28 regional IOs from around the world. They operationalize each of the analytical perspectives with quantitative indicators and find support for all three types of explanation. They conclude that the dominant audience-based perspective is relevant in understanding discursive legitimation strategies, but that it is seriously incomplete without additional consideration of agent- and environment-based perspectives.[94]

Coni-Zimmer, Deitelhoff and Schumann investigate why international economic organizations maintain dialogue forums in which IO representatives exchange views with representatives from global civil society. They operationalize the three analytical perspectives through observable implications across the analytical dimensions of openness, transparency and consequentiality, enabling qualitative testing. The authors highlight cumulative and interactive effects between the sources of legitimation strategies. They find strong audience-based effects related to the activities of civil society, and emphasize the relevance of isomorphic effects. Relevant audience- and environment-based origins also induce strategic reactions of international institutions acting as agents.[95]

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[94] Lenz and Schmidtke, 'Agents, audiences and peers'.
[95] Coni-Zimmer et al., 'The path of least resistance'.

These two studies indicate that the dominant audience-based perspective, which interprets IO legitimation strategies as efforts to respond to the normative demands of audiences, provides relevant insights into the origin of legitimation strategies, yet it is seriously incomplete when standing on its own. Agent- and environment-based perspectives not only complement the audience-based perspective to explain more of the observed variance, but they also emerge as more compelling and relevant in some analyses. These findings suggest that, for too long, the research field of IO legitimacy and legitimation studies has neglected two analytical perspectives that provide coherent and empirically relevant alternatives to explanations of IO legitimation strategies that emphasize audience demands.

A second set of articles treats the three analytical perspectives of the AAE framework as theoretically distinct, yet not necessarily analytically rival, and examines in detail how they interact and may be combined. Some of these analyses also identify scope conditions for their application. Von Billerbeck analyses the conditions under which the legitimation narratives espoused by the leadership of an IO's bureaucracy are endorsed, challenged or rejected by staff. She shows how, when IO leaders employ narratives that emphasize performance or politics, agent-driven narratives are likely to be challenged by counter-narratives stemming from staff audiences.[96] Thus, von Billerbeck combines the agent- and audience-based perspectives in a sequential manner to explain narrative success. Her analysis suggests that the perspectives are complementary, rather than rival, when scholars seek accounts of IO legitimation that extend over time.

Lora Anne Viola studies the legitimation strategies and legitimacy-generating capacity of informal groups of developing countries at the WTO. Her article amends the authority–legitimacy link to show why and how low-authority institutions—in this case informal groups—seek legitimacy. In addition, she argues that the origins of such legitimation strategies will depend on who is seeking legitimacy from whom. Viola argues that when an informal group at the WTO seeks legitimacy from its own constituent members, legitimation is primarily audience-driven. By contrast, when the informal group seeks legitimacy from the WTO itself, this legitimation is agent-driven, because in this case the informal group acts as an agent that is proactively promoting its own legitimation narratives towards the WTO. Viola also analyses how the WTO secretariat has supported informal groups as part of its commitment to enhancing the legitimacy of the organization. When legitimacy is sought from developed countries, legitimation is audience-driven; when legitimacy is sought from developing country members, WTO support for informal groups is agent-driven and based on a commitment by staff to better reconcile IO practices with the informal group's normative principles of inclusion and equality.[97] Thus, Viola suggests scope conditions for the application of the audience- and agent-based perspectives that turn on who is seeking legitimacy from whom.

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[96] Von Billerbeck, 'Organizational narratives and self-legitimation in international organizations'.
[97] Lora Anne Viola, 'Two-sided legitimation strategies: informal groups at the World Trade Organization', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 983–1002.

Joel Ng examines the legitimation of the 'Indo-Pacific' security architecture by three core actors: the United States, China and ASEAN. He argues that the three actors have distinct ideas about regional order and thus legitimize their ideas in different ways. Ng combines the three analytical perspectives by theorizing how different perspectives tend to be associated with the relational power that actors have towards each other. Specifically, he proposes that established powers (the US) tend to root their legitimation strategies in their own normative beliefs (agent-based); rising powers (China) are likely to construct legitimation strategies on the basis of relevant audiences' beliefs (audience-based); and weak powers (ASEAN) are most likely to construct legitimation strategies by observing the strategies of other actors around them (environment-based).[98] Thus, Ng identifies the incentives that differentially placed actors confront when drawing on specific origins in their construction of legitimation strategies.

A third set of articles extends the AAE framework by further developing and extending individual analytical perspectives. Spandler and Söderbaum study the legitimation strategies of populist leaders in regional IOs in Europe, south-east Asia and Latin America.[99] They argue that such leaders tend to use representational legitimation frames, which emphasize sovereignty and popular identity, rather than the conventional procedural and functional justifications that dominate in established organizations such as the UN and the EU. Such representational legitimation is agent-based because it is rooted in leaders' normative beliefs and aims to actively persuade audiences of alternative normative standards instead of adapting to their demands. At the same time, the authors' analysis extends the agent-based perspective through a detailed examination of how populist leaders use representational legitimation frames to challenge the liberal notions of legitimacy upon which many of today's IOs are founded. Instead of retreating to the unilateralist stance that all IOs are illegitimate, however, these leaders strongly endorse IOs that appear as guarantors of popular sovereignty and identity.

Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann examines the legitimation strategies advanced by representatives of Mercosur member states and by the organization's regional bureaucrats during three critical moments when the organization was the object of extensive public debate: the Brazilian currency devaluation in 1999, the accession of Venezuela in 2012 and the proposal to 'flexibilize' Mercosur in 2021.[100] She extends the agent-based perspective of the AAE framework by specifying and analysing how political ideologies—neo-liberalism, democratic socialism (social democracy), twenty-first-century socialism and conservatism—informed the legitimation strategies of these agents in each of these critical moments. In so doing, Ribeiro Hoffmann describes the international politics of the agent-based perspective that entails how agents with different normative beliefs and party affiliations produce a more or less coherent IO legitimation strategy.

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[98] Joel Ng, 'ASEAN, Chinese and US legitimation strategies over the Indo-Pacific security architecture', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 1003–22.

[99] Spandler and Söderbaum, 'Populist (de)legitimation of international organizations'.

[100] Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann, 'Mercosur at 30: political ideologies and (de)legitimation strategies', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 1043–61.

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Alice Ba also develops and extends the audience- and agent-based perspectives by exploring the role of audience diversification in both cases. A core challenge in both perspectives is the heterogeneity of audiences and agents, which makes it difficult for agents to construct coherent and successful legitimation strategies. Ba explores the reasons why such heterogeneity has increased over the past 20 to 30 years, and how organizations—ASEAN in her case—have sought to cope with this challenge.[101] Hence, her conceptual contribution is the exploration of one core challenge in the agent- and audience-based perspectives, in terms of both how it plays out empirically and how IOs deal with it.

Palestini studies the politics of legitimation in the combined sanction regime against Venezuela from 2014 to 2019. He argues that such regimes are regularly embedded in international networks of sanction senders, and therefore explores an explanation of sanction regimes that draws on the environment-based perspective. Palestini contends that understanding the legitimation strategies of Latin American regional IOs requires analysing how they observe, monitor and react to the legitimation strategies of other senders. Yet such mutual observation, he contends, not only leads to isomorphism in outcomes—that is, similar legitimation strategies across diverse actors—but may likewise induce processes of differentiation between sanction senders.[102]

In sum, the AAE framework provides a versatile analytical basis for exploring the origins of IO legitimation strategies. In the empirical articles in this special section, scholars use it in three ways: (1) to test the relative explanatory strength of the three analytical perspectives it comprises; (2) to explore how the three perspectives interact and may be combined; and finally, (3) to further develop and extend individual perspectives.

[101] Ba, 'Diversification's legitimation challenges'.
[102] Palestini, 'The politics of legitimation in combined sanction regimes'.