

1 *Introduction*

Elite communication about the strengths and weaknesses of international organizations (IOs) is an increasingly common feature of global politics. As IOs have gained far-reaching political authority, in the expectation that they can help solve transboundary problems, they have also become more contested. While elites historically have been some of the staunchest supporters of international cooperation, they are now divided over the merits of IOs. Member governments criticize IOs for unpopular policies but also endorse them to protect multilateral arenas. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) challenge IOs for insufficient ambitions but also praise their efforts to consult with stakeholders. IOs themselves regularly trumpet their achievements in their public relations but also occasionally admit to their shortcomings. Recently, elite communication about IOs has gained additional topicality through the challenges from populist politicians on the right and the left, criticizing IOs for being undemocratic, politically biased, and detrimental to national sovereignty.

Consider the example of how elites around the world quarreled in public over the World Health Organization (WHO) following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. It all started with former United States (US) President Donald Trump sharply criticizing the WHO's response to the pandemic, which then escalated into a threat of withdrawing US funding, and eventually culminated in Trump declaring a termination of the US relationship with the WHO, since the organization had "failed to make the requested and greatly needed reforms" (CNN, May 29, 2020). Brazil's prime minister, Jair Bolsonaro, joined in the critique, calling the WHO a "partisan political organization" that had not acted responsibly and therefore lost credibility (Reuters, June 9, 2020). These criticisms and actions did not go unchallenged. Then German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed her "full support for the WHO" (Deutsche Welle, April 16, 2020), Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declared that "multilateral

institutions like the WHO are extremely important, particularly at a time of a global health crisis” (CTV News, May 19, 2020), and Chinese President Xi Jinping underlined the decisive role of the WHO, which had made “a major contribution in leading and advancing the global response to COVID-19” (*China Daily*, May 18, 2020). NGOs and IOs too rushed to the defense of the WHO. For instance, the director of the Global Health Council stated that “WHO plays a central role in the global response to COVID-19, from country guidance to vaccine trials,” while the spokesperson for the United Nations (UN) asserted that “WHO is showing the strength of the international health system” (Reuters, April 7, 2020).

Yet, despite the prominence of such elite communication in global politics, we know little about its effects on the popular legitimacy of IOs. While a growing scholarly literature explores the contestation around IOs, the consequences for legitimacy remain poorly understood. That citizens consider IOs to be legitimate is important from a democratic perspective, as IOs wield extensive power in world politics, often supplanting national decision-making. In addition, IOs, like all organizations, are more likely to govern effectively when they enjoy legitimacy. Popular legitimacy affects whether IOs remain relevant as political arenas, makes it easier for IOs to gain political support for ambitious new policies, and influences IOs’ ability to secure compliance with international norms and rules.

The ambition of this book is to offer the first systematic assessment of the effects of elite communication on the popular legitimacy of IOs. Guided by the question of *whether, when, and why elite communication shapes citizens’ legitimacy beliefs toward IOs*, it provides an in-depth analysis of how different elites affect public opinion on global governance. It addresses this question in ways that bridge scholarship in cognitive psychology, comparative politics, and international relations, and advances an expanding agenda of research on legitimacy in global governance.

We conceptualize elites as people who hold leading positions in political and societal organizations, citizens as the general public in a country, communication as discursive messages conveying information about a particular topic, and legitimacy as the belief that an institution exercises authority appropriately. Substantively, we explore the scope for party politicians, government bureaucrats, civil society representatives, and international officials to shape

popular legitimacy beliefs toward IOs through publicly communicated messages.

The book makes three distinct contributions to existing knowledge. First, we develop a novel theory of the effects of elite communication in global governance. While existing explanations attribute legitimacy beliefs to individual, institutional, and societal factors, our theory privileges the process of elite communication. Inspired by research on heuristic opinion formation, it assumes that citizens usually lack sufficient information to form independent opinions about IOs. Citizens therefore turn to communication by elites as an efficient shortcut to opinions. But reliance on elites for information comes with consequences. Our theory explains why communication empowers elites to shape the opinions of citizens and when those effects are particularly strong. It theorizes conditions for influence associated with each core component of the communicative situation – the elite, the message, and the citizen.

Second, we offer the most comprehensive empirical examination to date of the effects of elite communication in global governance. While research in American and comparative politics is rich in analyses of elite influence, this literature remains exclusively focused on the domestic setting. Only a handful of studies have examined the effects of elite communication in the international setting, mainly with a focus on the European Union (EU). In contrast, this book explores the effects of elite communication on popular legitimacy beliefs in a broad global governance context, drawing on comparative evidence from IOs in multiple issue areas and from countries in different world regions. This design allows us to identify general patterns and scope conditions in the influence of elites over citizens' legitimacy beliefs.

Third, we push the methodological frontier in research on the legitimacy of global governance. While the existing literature primarily relies on data from public opinion polls, this book makes use of experimental methods for causal inference, which are particularly well suited for establishing effects of elite communication. Experiments allow us to bypass the classic problem of establishing whether elites influence citizens or the other way around, and to identify the effects of elite communication under different conditions, while controlling for any other potential explanations of legitimacy beliefs. The book presents the results of five survey experiments conducted among

nationally representative samples of citizens, comprising both vignette and conjoint designs. Our approach makes legitimacy beliefs ever more tractable as a topic of social scientific research.

Our core findings are twofold. First, the way in which elites communicate about IOs matters extensively for citizens' evaluations of the legitimacy of these organizations. When elites criticize or endorse IOs in the public debate, citizens pay attention and adjust their opinions. This capacity to shape popular legitimacy beliefs extends across domestic and global elites, including political parties, member governments, NGOs, and IOs themselves. Moreover, elites can exercise influence by targeting a variety of IO qualities, from the degree of authority they exercise and the social purpose they pursue to the procedures they use and the performance they achieve.

Second, elites are more likely to shape citizen legitimacy perceptions under some conditions rather than others. These conditions are associated with each of the three components of the communicative situation: the elite, the message, and the citizen. Elites are more influential in shaping people's legitimacy perceptions when perceived as credible. In addition, elites are more influential when highly polarized, since polarization makes messages clearer and more distinct. Messages are more effective in shaping legitimacy beliefs when conveying negative rather than positive information about IOs. Moreover, messages targeting IOs that have been subject to less contestation in the past are more likely to influence people's opinions. Finally, citizens are more responsive to elite communication when they are ideologically closer to the elites issuing the messages.

Our results carry several broader implications for the understanding of politics. First, they speak to scholarship on the drivers of legitimacy in global governance, demonstrating that elite communication constitutes an independent source of such beliefs and that citizens care about the institutional qualities of IOs. Second, they engage with the rapidly growing literature on legitimation and delegitimation in global governance, showing that elites' communicative practices are not inconsequential positioning but have distinct implications for how citizens perceive IOs. Third, they contribute to research on elite influence in politics, identifying the ways in which communication effects in the global realm are similar to, or distinct from, corresponding dynamics in the domestic setting. Finally, our findings shed light on the recent backlash against IOs in world politics, explaining why elites of discontent

can shape and exploit public grievances for political gain and suggesting how supporters of international cooperation may fight back.

Research Problem

Elite contestation over the merits and demerits of IOs has become increasingly prominent over recent decades, fueled by growing divisions among elites over international cooperation and the advent of new channels of communication. On the one hand, IOs are frequently criticized by NGO representatives, leaders of rising powers, and populist politicians. On the other hand, many political and societal elites still defend IOs as necessary vehicles for collaboration on cross-border problems.

NGOs frequently level criticism against IOs (O'Brien et al. 2000; Scholte and Schnabel 2003; Beyeler and Kriesi 2005; Della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Pallas 2013; Kalm and Uhlin 2015; Sommerer 2016; Rauh and Zürn 2020). Protests organized by NGOs have attracted particular attention, possibly because of the political drama involved. Classic examples are the protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in 1999, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in Prague in 2000, the Group of Eight (G8) in Genoa in 2001, and the EU in Gothenburg in 2001. More recent examples include the protests against the EU and the IMF in Greece in 2015, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the EU and the US in 2015–2016, and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between Canada and the EU in 2017. As illustrated by these examples, NGO protests were particularly intense in the early 2000s and have primarily been directed at global economic governance (Sommerer 2016; Sommerer et al. 2022; Uhlin and Gregoratti 2022).

NGOs tend to target either the decision-making procedures of IOs, which are blamed for being undemocratic and inefficient, or the policy performances of IOs, which are attacked as ineffective and unfair in their consequences. Concerns with fairness and democracy are particularly prominent when NGO leaders have taken to the media (Rauh and Zürn 2020). Fairness concerns often relate to poverty alleviation, debt relief, social equality, environmental protection, and human rights, while democratic concerns often pertain to transparency, social accountability, civil society participation, and inequalities

in representation between the Global North and the Global South. In most cases, NGOs do not reject international cooperation per se; rather, they are dissatisfied with the way global governance is executed and, in some cases, actually want more rather than less of it (Zürn et al. 2019).

Another group of critics are the leaders of rising powers in world politics (Stephen and Zürn 2019; Kruck and Zangl 2020). Recent decades have witnessed a shift in the global distribution of power from established powers in Europe and North America to rising powers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Layne 2012; Brooks and Wohlworth 2015/2016). With the rise of new regional and global powers, the distribution of influence within this institutional order has been called into question. What may have appeared as a reasonable arrangement in times of Western dominance is increasingly seen as unjust and unreflective of economic and political realities. The distribution of structural capabilities has shifted decisively in favor of the rising powers, while the US and its allies are in relative decline – economically, demographically, and militarily.

This shift in geopolitical weight has gone hand in hand with demands for greater representation and influence in global governance. At the forefront of these demands are the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – but also other powers call for greater influence (Kruck and Zangl 2020). For instance, regional powers without permanent seats have called for institutional reforms that would make the UN Security Council (UNSC) more inclusive and egalitarian. China has demanded a recalibration of the system of voting weights in the IMF and the World Bank. Brazil and India have requested to become part of the core negotiating group of the WTO, previously restricted to the US, the EU, Japan, and Canada. These demands are intimately related to the legitimacy of the liberal international order (Stephen and Zürn 2019; Tallberg and Verhaegen 2020; Kentikelenis and Voeten 2021). “[T]he crisis of the liberal order is a crisis of legitimacy,” as Ikenberry (2018, 19) puts it.

However, the most vociferous critics of IOs at the current point in time are likely the antiglobalist populists on the left and the right (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Hooghe et al. 2019; Adler and Drieschova 2021; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; De Vries et al. 2021; Söderbaum et al. 2021). Encouraged by electoral gains in recent years, populist politicians have made fierce criticism of IOs part and parcel

of their political message. Radical-left populists tend not to reject international cooperation per se as much as they question its distributive profile, arguing that IOs impose reforms that hurt countries and groups already worse off. Examples include the political parties Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, both of which rose to prominence in the wake of the Eurozone economic crisis. For instance, when serving as Greece's minister of finance, Syriza's Yanis Varoufakis famously accused the EU and the IMF of terrorism because of the conditions they imposed on the country (*The Guardian*, July 7, 2015).

More principled rejection of international cooperation comes from the far right. Right-wing populists tend to accuse IOs of undermining national sovereignty and contributing to sociocultural change by spurring economic, political, and cultural globalization. In their analysis, international cooperation is an elite project, distant from the true wishes of the people. In this vein, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French far-right party National Rally, declared globalization her enemy number one in the presidential election of 2017 (Politico, February 5, 2017), while Michael Gove, a leading advocate for Brexit, criticized the EU for being "distant, unaccountable, and elitist," before famously adding that "this country has had enough of experts from organizations with acronyms" (Sky News, June 3, 2016). Other examples include Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil dismissing the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński of Poland challenging the EU, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines attacking the UN, and, of course, Donald Trump of the US criticizing multilateral cooperation in a range of IOs, including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), UNFCCC, WHO, and WTO.

Still, many – perhaps most – political and societal leaders around the world remain committed to international cooperation. In some cases, they have even stepped up the defense of multilateralism in response to the intensifying challenges from critical NGOs, rising powers, and antiglobalist populists. Politicians in the liberal mainstream speak up in favor of IOs, typically emphasizing their necessity for solving cross-border problems (De Vries et al. 2021). NGOs favorably disposed toward IOs highlight their role in fighting human rights violations, combating climate change, and preventing health pandemics (Stephen and Zürn 2019). Leaders in Western powers with a stake in the liberal international order defend current arrangements

as well functioning (Kruck and Zangl 2020). IOs themselves increasingly invest in public communication, justifying their operations and policies to a variety of stakeholders, from governments to citizens (Zaum 2013; Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018; Dingwerth et al. 2019; Bexell et al. 2022). Recent years have even seen the emergence of new advocates for global governance, such as global coalitions of city leaders and businesses working with the UNFCCC to address climate change.

This contestation over global governance presents us with a range of questions about the consequences of elite communication. Are the opponents of multilateralism getting through to citizens? Are the defenders of global governance able to counteract these attacks? If elites indeed are shaping how citizens think about international cooperation, then why are people susceptible to such communication? Is it because citizens mindlessly follow any elite who tries to lead them, or because they seek information and know just too well whom to trust, or because of some other reason? Moreover, are citizens particularly responsive to elite communication under some circumstances rather than others? For instance, does it depend on the elite engaging in communication, the nature of the message, and the characteristics of the citizen?

Getting traction on these questions is essential. Popular legitimacy is central to IOs' capacity to govern and achieve change in world politics. By uncovering the effects of elite communication on popular legitimacy beliefs, we can help to identify the factors that facilitate or impede effective global governance. As Buchanan and Keohane (2006, 407) put it: "The perception of legitimacy matters, because, in a democratic era, multilateral institutions will only thrive if they are viewed as legitimate by democratic publics."

First, legitimacy influences whether IOs remain relevant as arenas for states' efforts to coordinate policies and solve problems. In a world of forum shopping and organizational turf battles, legitimacy is a crucial resource for IOs wishing to fend off multilateral competitors and unilateral action (Morse and Keohane 2014; Zelli 2018). For instance, the dwindling legitimacy of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in many African countries is widely seen as a challenge for the court's relevance, leading to demands for the establishment of an African court (Clarke et al. 2016; Helfer and Showalter 2017). Conversely, states actively seek the endorsement of the UNSC because this lends international legitimacy to their actions, thereby further reaffirming the stature of this body (Hurd 2007; Binder and Heupel 2015).

Second, legitimacy affects the capacity of IOs to develop new rules and norms. When IOs suffer from poor legitimacy among citizens, this makes it more difficult to gain governments' support for ambitious policy goals and to secure ratification of new agreements (Putnam 1988; Martin 2000). For instance, successive rejections of new EU treaties by citizens in several countries have put plans for further large-scale reforms on the back burner. Most dramatically, British citizens in 2016 voted to leave the EU altogether, not only illustrating the importance of popular legitimacy for a state's active engagement in international cooperation but also the paralyzing effects of a legitimacy crisis on IO policy-making, as the EU was forced to focus its political energy on negotiating Brexit.

Third, legitimacy shapes IOs' ability to secure compliance with international rules and norms. Not only is legitimacy a much cheaper means to obtain compliance than coercion; in addition, few IOs command the coercive power to compel state and nonstate actors to comply, making legitimacy particularly important in global governance (Franck 1990; Hurd 1999). Evidence from a broad range of regulatory domains and levels suggests that legitimacy contributes to compliance, even when adjustment costs are high (Chayes and Chayes 1998; Zürn and Joerges 2005). Conversely, low legitimacy can hurt the respect for international rules. For instance, the weak legitimacy of the IMF has often hampered the implementation of its macroeconomic prescriptions in countries.

Finally, the popular legitimacy of IOs speaks to fundamental normative concerns about global governance. If IOs lack legitimacy in society, this contributes to a democratic deficit in global governance (Dahl 1999; Zürn 2000; Held and Koenig-Archibugi 2005). As political authority increasingly shifts to the global level (Hooghe et al. 2017; Zürn 2018), democracy's preservation requires that IOs are both structured in accordance with democratic principles and perceived by citizens as legitimate systems of governance. While the EU, for instance, may conform well to many democratic standards, and even features a directly elected parliament, it would be normatively problematic if European citizens did not have faith in its legitimacy. In this vein, the low turnout in European Parliament elections is often-times cited as an indication of the EU's faltering democratic legitimacy (Hix 2008; Schmidt 2012).

These benefits of legitimacy are not unique to IOs but mirror advantages for organizations, in general, emphasized by social theorists in a

variety of disciplines. Sociologists variously identify legitimacy as a crucial resource (Parsons 1960; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) or constitutive feature (Meyer and Scott 1983; DiMaggio and Powell 1991) of well-functioning organizations (Suchman 1995). Lawyers and psychologists stress how legitimacy creates a sense of obligation to defer to the decisions of an authority (Milgram 1974; Franck 1990; Tyler 1990). Political scientists highlight the role of popular legitimacy in a well-functioning democracy (Habermas 1976; Beetham 1991; Dahl and Lindblom 1992) and assess the consequences of political systems possessing larger or smaller amounts of it (Hetherington 2005; Booth and Seligson 2009; Norris 2011).

Argument

This book advances a novel theory about the effects of elite communication on citizen legitimacy beliefs toward IOs. We conceive of elites as people who hold leading positions in key organizations in society that strive to be politically influential (Mosca 1939; Khan 2012; Verhaegen et al. 2021). This understanding includes both political and societal elites, and both global and domestic elites. We conceptualize citizens as the general public in a country. Citizens are political subjects with rights and responsibilities as members of the public (Dewey 1927), whose collective opinions may be studied through nationally representative polls. We understand communication as discursive or verbal messages that convey information about a particular topic. Communication is a process of transmission and interpretation that involves a source, a message, and a receiver (Fiske 2011). Finally, as explained at greater length in Chapter 3, we conceive of legitimacy in sociological or empirical terms as the belief or perception that an institution exercises authority appropriately (Weber 1922/1978; Tallberg and Zürn 2019).

Our theory explains why citizens are susceptible to elite communication and when those effects are particularly strong. It starts from the assumption that elites deliberately seek to influence how citizens perceive IOs and that citizens are receptive to such communication because of information deficits. It then theorizes the conditions under which citizens are more or less likely to be influenced by elites, focusing on the core components of the communicative situation – the elite, the message, and the citizen. Our theory suggests that citizens' legitimacy beliefs toward IOs are profoundly shaped by how elites speak about IOs but also that such effects vary in predictable ways.

Our account is inspired by theories of heuristics in cognitive psychology, as well as theories of cueing and framing in American and comparative politics. Cognitive psychology offers powerful insights about the limitations that individuals confront in processing information, the heuristic strategies they use to deal with this condition, and the implications of relying on such cognitive shortcuts (e.g., Tversky and Kahneman 1974; Kahneman et al. 1982; Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier 2011; Fiske and Taylor 2017). Theories of cueing and framing in turn build on these insights to better understand when, how, and why citizen opinions are influenced by political information (e.g., Sniderman et al. 1991; Lau and Redlask 2001; Bullock 2011; Druckman et al. 2013). We draw on these two strands of theory to develop our argument for why citizens are receptive to elite communication about IOs and when elites are likely to be particularly influential. Similar to earlier accounts, we highlight how information deficits lead citizens to form opinions based on cognitive shortcuts. Different from earlier accounts, we identify and theorize the particular conditions in global governance that shape the effects of elite communication.

Our theory positions elite communication a global political context, distinct from the domestic political context conventionally analyzed in studies of elite communication. Global politics is generally characterized by a greater variety of political actors, more complex patterns of political authority, and weaker links between citizens and political institutions. These features of global politics shape the conditions for communication in terms of elites, objects, and citizens. In this setting, typical messengers comprise both globally active elites, such as member governments, non-state actors, and IOs themselves, and domestically oriented elites, such as political parties. In present-day politics, IOs are not the exclusive concern of actors on the international stage, nor are political parties exclusively communicating about domestic political issues. Moreover, in this setting, messages about IOs typically invoke the institutional qualities of these organizations: their social purpose, the authority they have been granted, the procedures they use to make decisions, and their performance in solving societal problems. Elites focus their communication on these qualities because they are central to IOs as governance systems and because elites expect them to matter for people's attitudes toward IOs. Finally, in this setting, citizens hold patterns of knowledge and beliefs that matter for elite communication. The public's opinions of international issues are typically less informed, less politically salient, and more ambivalent.

Our theory offers answers to two crucial questions. First, why would elite communication be influential in shaping citizens' legitimacy beliefs toward IOs? We argue that this expectation is logically grounded in three assumptions: (1) citizens' political awareness tends to be low, (2) citizens therefore rely on heuristics to form political opinions, and (3) reliance on heuristics makes citizens susceptible to elite influence. The general point is that citizens behave no differently when forming opinions about IOs than what they do when making up their minds about domestic politics or other issues in life – they depend on heuristics. In fact, people may even be particularly prone to rely on cognitive shortcuts in the context of global governance, which they tend to know relatively less well.

Second, when should elite communication be particularly influential in shaping citizens' legitimacy beliefs toward IOs? We argue that elite influence is likely to vary with conditions associated with the communicative setting: the elite, the message, and the citizen. Specifically, we identify six moderating factors: elite credibility, elite polarization, tone of the message, object of the message, citizens' political awareness, and citizens' political beliefs. The central point is that citizens are varyingly susceptible to elite influence depending on a set of identifiable conditions in the communicative situation. These conditions shape the extent to which elite information about the institutional qualities of IOs influence citizens' legitimacy beliefs toward these organizations.

The core findings of the book are consistent with our expectations. First, the way in which elites communicate about IOs has clear effects on the extent to which citizens perceive IOs to be legitimate. When elites invoke qualities of IOs to endorse or criticize these organizations in public, citizens listen and take notice. This potential to shape public opinion is not reserved for specific elites, such as national governments, but extends across a variety of global and domestic elites, including NGOs, IOs, and political parties. Similarly, communication is influential irrespective of which specific institutional quality that elites target in their messages – the authority, purpose, procedure, or performance of IOs. Second, elites are more able to shape citizen opinion toward IOs under some conditions rather than others. The context of the communicative situation thus matters for the degree of elite influence. As theorized, these moderating factors pertain to elites, messages, and citizens.

As the sources of information about IOs, elites themselves matter for the effectiveness of the communication. Elites that are perceived as more

credible are more influential in shaping people's legitimacy perceptions. Domestically, people listen particularly to political parties with which they sympathize. Globally, people are more attuned to messages from member governments and NGOs than from IOs, which likely are seen as biased when communicating about themselves. In addition, the degree of polarization among elites conditions effects of communication on citizen's perceptions of IOs. Notably, political parties are considerably more influential in a highly polarized setting in which parties are far apart, such as the US, compared to a lowly polarized setting in which the main parties are relatively close, such as Germany.

Other moderating factors are associated with the message as such. The tone of a message matters for the likelihood that it catches people's attention and influences their opinions of IOs. Negative messages are more effective than positive. When elites criticize IOs by invoking democratic deficits or poor performances, they therefore get through more easily to citizens than when they endorse the same organizations. Furthermore, the object of a message matters. When messages target IOs that already have been subject to extensive societal contestation, the likelihood of further communication effects is significantly reduced. Citizens have then developed stronger priors about the IO in question, reducing the probability that additional information will shift their opinions.

Finally, the effectiveness of elite communication depends on characteristics of citizens as recipients of information about IOs. Citizens' political beliefs matter in multiple ways for the impact of elite communication. Citizens are most receptive to elite communication when they are ideologically proximate to the elites issuing these messages. Moreover, citizens interpret the same information about IOs in different ways, and with different consequences for legitimacy beliefs, depending on their preexisting political beliefs. While, for instance, information that an IO is engaged in combating climate change boosts the legitimacy perceptions of people on the left, it decreases the legitimacy perceptions of people on the right.

Research Design

Studying empirically how elites shape the popular legitimacy of IOs is a challenging task. Legitimacy beliefs are commonly seen as a complex and elusive phenomenon that is difficult to capture empirically.

Identifying whether elites influence publics or whether publics rather influence elites is a notorious problem. And systematically examining how effects of elite communication vary across contexts puts great demands on research design. Our strategy for dealing with these challenges consists of three components: a survey approach, an experimental approach, and a comparative approach.

To start with, we opt for surveys as our approach for capturing legitimacy beliefs empirically. Surveys allow us to tap into the beliefs or perceptions of individuals vis-à-vis IOs. While there are several ways of operationalizing legitimacy beliefs in survey research, as we discuss in Chapter 3, all are based on the idea that such beliefs are subjective perceptions that individuals can be made to reveal through survey interviews. By aggregating individual survey responses, it is subsequently possible to map and compare legitimacy beliefs across countries, institutions, societal groups, and time, as well as to assess potential explanations of variation in legitimacy beliefs. Since the 1990s, extensive research in comparative politics and international relations has relied on the survey approach to legitimacy (e.g., Caldeira and Gibson 1995; Gilley 2006; Booth and Seligson 2009; Levi et al. 2009; Johnson 2011; Voeten 2013; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015; Anderson et al. 2019; Dellmuth et al. 2022b).

To be sure, surveys also have certain limitations. For example, we cannot know exactly how respondents interpret closed questions, nor what experiences they draw upon when selecting their answers. Other research has therefore explored alternative ways of capturing legitimacy beliefs. Some have turned to political communication, such as statements in news media and social media (e.g., Binder and Heupel 2015; Rauh and Zürn 2020). Others have focused on political behavior, such as patterns of participation and protest (e.g., Velasco-Guachalla et al. 2021; Sommerer et al. 2022). However, both communication and behavior involve actions that are more likely to have strategic intent and are therefore less likely to capture sincere legitimacy beliefs. In addition, neither alternative is well suited to map legitimacy beliefs in a representative sample of a population, since these approaches focus specifically on those individuals who actively seek to make their voices heard. We therefore regard surveys as superior in identifying, aggregating, comparing, and explaining legitimacy beliefs.

The second key component of our research design is an experimental approach. Compared to regular observational surveys, surveys

with embedded experiments have particular advantages in identifying causal effects of elite communication. Any effort to establish whether elite communication affects public opinion by looking for relationships between elite statements and citizen views in polls confronts two well-known problems: complex causality and omitted variables (Gabel and Scheve 2007; Mutz 2011). For instance, correlations between elite communication and mass opinion may not only arise from elite effects on public attitudes but also result from public opinion influencing the positions of elites. In addition, correlations between elite communication and public opinion could result from a third unobserved cause, such as developments in the political environment that affect both elite and public opinion simultaneously. These problems are common concerns in previous research that investigates whether elite communication affects attitudes toward IOs based on efforts to link elite and public opinion data (e.g., Steenbergen and Jones 2002; Gabel and Scheve 2007; Chalmers and Dellmuth 2015).

Survey experiments offer a way out of these problems (Gaines et al. 2007; Sniderman 2011). They allow us to establish causal effects of elite communication by comparing citizens treated with specific messages from specific elites to citizens in a control group that are not treated with any message. In addition, the randomization of individuals built into any experimental design makes it possible to control for other potential explanations of citizen legitimacy beliefs, which may be unrelated to elite communication.

Specifically, we rely on population-based survey experiments. The advantage of this type of survey experiment is that theories can be tested on samples that are representative of a certain population, usually the citizens in a certain country (Mutz 2011). To implement our population-based survey experiments, we relied on online panels from YouGov, a well-reputed global survey company (Berinsky et al. 2012). YouGov uses targeted quota sampling with the aim to achieve representative samples at the end of the fieldwork. The samples for our survey experiments were matched to the full populations of the selected countries using age, education, gender, and party identification, and generally produce accurate population estimates (Ansolabehere and Rivers 2013; Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014) (Online Appendix A).

We use two types of survey experiments in the book. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, we rely on vignette experiments. Vignette experiments are particularly useful when seeking to establish the separate causal

effects of multiple factors in complex theories (Mutz 2011, Ch. 4). Vignettes are short statements of one or a few sentences that contain the treatment and precede the question of interest. The purpose of vignette treatments is to assess what difference it makes when the factors embedded in the vignette are systematically varied. This method is common in research about how party cues affect public opinion (e.g., Druckman et al. 2013; Maier et al. 2012) and has become increasingly frequent in the study of global governance as well (e.g., Anderson et al. 2019; Isani and Schlipphak 2020; Spilker et al. 2020). In our experiments, the vignette treatments systematically vary the elites and the messages involved in communication and precede a question used to measure legitimacy beliefs toward an IO. By comparing average legitimacy beliefs in different treatment groups to those in a control group and to each other, we can establish if elite communication shapes citizen legitimacy beliefs and whether some elites or messages are more effective than others.

In Chapter 7, we instead rely on a conjoint experiment. Conjoint experiments involve having respondents rank or rate two or more hypothetical choices that have multiple attributes. The objective is to ascertain the influence of each attribute on respondents' choices. Conjoint experiments thereby allow researchers to establish the causal effects of many treatment components simultaneously. In recent years, conjoint experiments have become increasingly common in political science (Hainmueller et al. 2014), including the study of global governance (Bechtel and Scheve 2013; Bernauer et al. 2020). In our experiment, we assess the influence of information about different institutional qualities of IOs on citizens' legitimacy beliefs. The conjoint design thus allows us to compare whether elite information about some institutional qualities is more effective than information about other qualities, when citizens simultaneously consider information about all qualities.

A question that frequently arises in relation to survey experimental research is whether its findings actually capture effects and patterns in the real world. After all, experiments such as ours expose respondents to stimuli in an artificial survey setting meant to represent actual communication by elites in public discourse. Like other survey experimental researchers, we recognize the limitations of our approach in this respect. However, there are reasons to remain optimistic about the usefulness of survey experiments in capturing real effects of elite

communication. Previous research suggests that the choices individuals make in vignette and conjoint experiments closely match the choices they make in real-world situations (Hainmueller et al. 2015).

In addition, we use a three-pronged strategy to strengthen confidence in our findings reflecting real-world outcomes. First, we strive to design experiments in ways that mimic conditions in the real world, for instance, using elite messages drawn from actual public discourse. Second, we rely on population-based samples of respondents rather than convenience samples to ensure that our findings are representative. Third, we discuss whether findings established in our experiments resonate with results from observational studies.

The third major component of our research design is its comparative scope. As noted, existing research on public opinion toward IOs is heavily focused on individual organizations, mainly the EU and to some extent the UN. Comparative analyses of legitimacy beliefs across several IOs are still in short supply. Similarly, most research on elite influence evaluates communication effects in single countries, usually the US. Comparative analyses of elite communication in multiple countries are notable for their absence. Our design breaks with this orientation of earlier scholarship by examining effects of elite communication across multiple countries and IOs. This allows us to establish the general importance of elite influence, while simultaneously exploring its conditionality across diverse contexts.

All five survey experiments were conducted in multiple countries. The included countries are Germany, the Philippines, South Africa, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US. This general selection of countries ensures diversity in contextual conditions, as it covers countries with different regional belongings, economic circumstances, political systems, and experiences of the IOs in question. At the same time, all are democratic countries, which avoids the issue that legitimacy for political institutions may mean different things to citizens of democratic and autocratic regimes (Jamal and Nooruddin 2010), and all have moderate to high levels of Internet penetration, thereby increasing the representativeness of the samples to the whole populations of those countries. Moreover, several of these countries are particularly politically important in the examined IOs, making our findings substantively important for the prospects of global governance. The specific combination of countries that we include varies slightly across the experiments, depending on the analytical purpose of the study.

For instance, in Chapter 5, we focus specifically on Germany and the US, since we want to explore how contextual variation in political polarization conditions the impact of party cueing on IO legitimacy beliefs. In contrast, Chapter 6 pools data from four diverse countries to reduce the risk of biases from contextual country factors.

Similarly, all five experiments are comparative across IOs. The included IOs are the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), African Union (AU), EU, IMF, NAFTA, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), UN, UNFCCC, UNSC, and WTO. In one experiment, we instead compare across hypothetical IOs. This general selection allows us to assess whether the occurrence and strength of elite communication effects vary across IOs in different policy fields. All selected IOs are central in their respective policy domains, known to citizens at a basic level, and regularly subject to positive and negative communication by elites. This ensures that treatments expressing elite messages about these IOs are understandable and reasonable to respondents. At the same time, the specific combination of IOs varies across the experiments depending on the analytical purpose. In Chapter 4, for instance, we seek to evaluate whether elite communication effects are conditioned by the level of prior contestation of an IO and therefore select IOs with variation in this respect. Likewise, in Chapter 7, we opt for a comparison between hypothetical IOs, since the conjoint analysis requires a level of precision in the experimental conditions that real-world IOs cannot offer.

State of the Art

This book relates to three important bodies of research. Neither has offered a systematic and comparative account of the effects of elite communication on IO legitimacy perceptions, as we do. Yet all have provided important inspiration for this project and all have something to learn from our findings.

To begin with, recent years have witnessed an upsurge of interest in the *legitimation and delegitimation of IOs* by political and societal elites. Legitimation and delegitimation are processes of justification and contestation, whereby supporters and opponents of IOs seek to influence audience perceptions of the legitimacy of these organizations (Tallberg et al. 2018; Tallberg and Zürn 2019; Bexell et al. 2022). Theoretically, this literature is inspired by Weber's (1922/1978, 213)

notion that every system of authority “attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy,” which directs our attention to the ways in which IOs are legitimized and delegitimized (see also Barker 2001). Empirically, it is spurred by recent developments in world politics that we have described in previous pages – the growing contestation and politicization of IOs around the world.

Simplifying slightly, this literature focuses on three categories of actors. First, growing out of social movement research, a range of contributions have explored opposition by NGOs against IOs (O’Brien et al. 2000; Kalm and Uhlin 2015; Gregoratti and Uhlin 2018; Stephen and Zürn 2019). Second, a number of studies have foregrounded states’ attempts at legitimizing and delegitimizing IOs as a means to further their objectives in world politics (Hurd 2007; Morse and Keohane 2014; Binder and Heupel 2015; Stephen and Zürn 2019). Third, scholars have started to thoroughly scrutinize IOs’ strategies of self-legitimation (Steffek 2003; Zaum 2013; Gronau and Schmidtke 2016; Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018; Zürn 2018; Dingwerth et al. 2019; Rocabert et al. 2019; von Billerbeck 2020).

Distinguishing between behavioral, discursive, and institutional legitimation and delegitimation (Bäckstrand and Söderbaum 2018), this literature maps the types of strategies actors use (e.g., Gronau and Schmidtke 2016), the kinds of narratives they advance (e.g., Dingwerth et al. 2019), and the sorts of audiences at which they direct these efforts (e.g., Bexell and Jönsson 2018). Lately, this research has also turned to explanations of variation in legitimation and delegitimation, examining factors such as the authority and purpose of IOs, as well as the level of democracy in their membership (e.g., Rocabert et al. 2019; Schmidtke 2019). Yet, so far, this literature has not explored whether and when legitimation and delegitimation are successful in shaping popular perceptions of IOs. While documenting and explaining an increasingly prominent phenomenon in global governance, existing work has thus shied away from perhaps the most important question of all: so what?

Another important body of research is the growing literature on *public opinion toward IOs*. When this literature focuses specifically on legitimacy beliefs toward IOs, it tends to break down into individual, institutional, and societal explanations (Tallberg et al. 2018: Chs. 3–5). Research that takes the individual as the starting point attributes legitimacy beliefs to characteristics and circumstances of the person

holding them, such as interest calculations, political values, social identification, and institutional trust (e.g., Dellmuth et al. 2022a, 2022b). Scholarship that adopts the organization as the starting point assumes that legitimacy beliefs arise from the features of IOs, such as their purposes, procedures, and performances (e.g., Hurd 2007; Bernauer and Gampfer 2013; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015; Anderson et al. 2019; Scholte and Tallberg 2018; Dellmuth et al. 2019; Bernauer et al. 2020; Verhaegen et al. 2021). Finally, research that embraces society as the starting point locates the sources of legitimacy beliefs in characteristics of the wider social structure, such as cultural norms, economic systems, and political regimes (e.g., Bernstein 2011; Gill and Cutler 2014; Scholte 2018).

In the broader literature on public opinion toward IOs, the debate has been dominated by competing perspectives on which individual-level logics that best explain variation in citizen attitudes. It features four main positions (Dellmuth et al. 2022b). The first emphasizes economic utility and expects people to form opinions based on cost-benefit assessments (e.g., Anderson and Reichert 1995; Dellmuth and Chalmers 2018; Gabel 1998; Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Lake 2009; Curtis et al. 2014; Rodrik 2018; Bearce and Jolliff Scott 2019; Brutger and Clark 2022). The second position highlights social identity and predicts that people with more cosmopolitan orientations are more favorably disposed toward IOs (Carey 2002; Hooghe and Marks 2005; McLaren 2006; Mansfield and Mutz 2009; Norris 2009). The third position stresses political values and suggests that political orientation shapes people's attitudes toward IOs (e.g., Norris 2000; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007; Inglehart and Norris 2017; Hooghe et al. 2019). Finally, the fourth position emphasizes domestic experiences and attitudes, expecting either positive or negative relationships with opinions toward IOs (Sánchez-Cuenca 2000; Muñoz 2011; Hartevelde et al. 2013; Voeten 2013; Armingeon and Ceka 2014; Chaudoin 2014; Schlipphak 2015; de Vries 2018; Chapman and Chaudoin 2020; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2020).

However, progress in research on public opinion toward IOs has been hampered by poor availability of systematic and comparable data (Dellmuth 2018). Data are either fragmented across disparate regional samples (e.g., Eurobarometer, Afrobarometer) or insufficiently systematic in their coverage of countries and IOs (e.g., World Values Survey [WVS]). As a consequence, most studies focus on individual IOs,

while comparisons across organizations are rare (but see Edwards 2009; Voeten 2013; Schlipphak 2015; Dellmuth et al. 2022a, 2022b). To date, the most impressive body of scholarship pertains to public opinion toward the EU, which has become an area of research in and of itself in European studies (for overviews, see Hooghe and Marks 2005; Hobolt and de Vries 2016). The UN is another organization covered by several studies (Torgler 2008; Norris 2009; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015).

Moreover, the role of elites in shaping public opinion toward IOs has received limited attention in this literature. The exception is a number of studies on the effects of party cueing and elite polarization in the context of the EU (Hooghe and Marks 2005; Gabel and Scheve 2007; de Vries and Edwards 2009; Maier et al. 2012; Torcal et al. 2018). However, this literature confronts a number of restrictions. Methodologically, it has proven difficult to establish the causal effects of elite communication on public opinion, given problems of complex causality and omitted variables, leading to calls for experimental designs. Empirically, its scope is limited to the EU, and the broader applicability of its findings has not been assessed. Theoretically, it focuses exclusively on how domestic parties influence public opinion, whereas elite communication in global governance is a broader phenomenon, involving legitimation and delegitimation by multiple types of elites.

Finally, we draw inspiration from the large body of scholarship on *elite communication* in American and comparative politics. This literature focuses on the influence of partisan elites on public opinion. Building on pioneering contributions by Downs (1957), Converse (1964), and Zaller (1992), it assumes that citizens turn to party elites for information that can help to simplify their political choices. Informed by this insight, scholars have examined the communicative processes by which elites influence public opinion, distinguishing between cueing and framing. While cueing effects arise whenever opinions are influenced by pieces of information that help people to make inferences without more detailed knowledge, framing effects refer more narrowly to changes in opinions that result from the way in which issues are presented (Druckman et al. 2010).

Both cueing and framing effects have attracted significant attention in the literature on elite communication and public opinion. Studies of cueing effects explore how simple information about the position

of a political party shapes people's opinions toward an issue (e.g., Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Hobolt 2007; Levendusky 2010; Bullock 2011; Leeper and Slothuus 2014; Torcal et al. 2018). Related, studies of framing effects explore how the ways in which politicians present issues affect people's attitudes toward those issues (e.g., Iyengar 1991; Nelson et al. 1999; Druckman 2004; Chong and Druckman 2007a; Busby et al. 2018; Zvobgo 2019). Having demonstrated that cueing and framing effects are ubiquitous in politics, this literature is nowadays primarily concerned with the conditions under which such effects are more or less likely. Among the moderating factors that studies examine are elite polarization (Levendusky 2010; Druckman et al. 2013), elite credibility (Druckman 2001), partisan identification (Leeper and Slothuus 2014), political awareness (Sniderman et al. 1991; Bullock 2011), competing messages (Chong and Druckman 2007b), and time (Chong and Druckman 2010). Studies of cueing and framing effects rely almost exclusively on experiments, because of their advantages in identifying and comparing causal effects across alternative conditions.

Yet, so far, this literature has hardly ventured beyond the setting of domestic politics; in fact, it remains overwhelmingly focused on party elites and public opinion in the US. When studies have considered world politics, it has been for the purpose of establishing whether party cueing may affect people's attitudes on international matters as well (Hiscox 2006; Berinsky 2009; Hicks et al. 2014; Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Dür and Schlipphak 2021). Yet we know of no studies in this tradition that examine elite communication about IOs, apart from the few studies on the EU, and of no studies that consider cueing and framing by other types of elites than political parties. Yet world politics is rife with elite contestation over IOs and offers a specific set of conditions that may shape the extent to which elites influence citizen attitudes.

This book advances on research in all three areas. First, we develop a novel theory of elite communication in global governance, explaining why elites influence people's legitimacy beliefs toward IOs and when those effects are particularly strong. Second, we adopt an experimental design that allows us to identify causal effects of elite communication with some certainty and to control for alternative explanations of legitimacy beliefs. Third, we study elite communication comparatively across a variety of IOs and countries, which permits us to establish the

general importance of elite influence, while simultaneously exploring its conditionality across diverse contexts.

Plan of the Book

This introduction is followed by seven chapters. Chapter 2 sets the stage for the book by providing an empirical overview of citizen legitimacy beliefs, elite legitimacy beliefs, and elite communication in global governance. It shows that citizen legitimacy beliefs vary across countries, IOs, and over time, but that there is no secular decline in IO legitimacy in the eyes of citizens; that elites are divided in their legitimacy beliefs toward IOs, but that they on average moderately support IOs; and that elite communication about IOs mainly is negative in tone, but also involves a broadening of narratives about IOs and a pattern of fluctuations over time.

Chapter 3 presents our theory of elite communication in global governance. It begins by introducing our conceptualization of legitimacy beliefs and our favored empirical measure of such beliefs. It then contextualizes our theory through a discussion of elites and messages in the global setting, before laying out the logic of the theory in two consecutive steps. The first step explains why we should expect elite communication to shape citizens' legitimacy beliefs, anchoring this expectation in assumptions about heuristic opinion formation. The second step specifies when we should expect elite communication to be particularly influential, identifying conditions associated with all three components of the communicative setting – elites, messages, and citizens.

Chapters 4 to 7 make up the empirical section of the book. These chapters are grouped in two parts. Chapters 4 and 5 focus specifically on the elites engaging in communication. Chapters 6 and 7, in turn, focus particularly on the content of communicated messages. This division of labor allows us to explore in greater depth the specific conditions for effective communication associated with elites and messages, respectively. Conditions associated with citizens are examined throughout all chapters.

More specifically, Chapter 4 explores the conditions under which globally active elites are influential in shaping citizens' legitimacy beliefs toward IOs. It distinguishes between member governments, NGOs, and IOs as three sets of global elites, evaluates whether these

elites impact legitimacy beliefs through their communication, and identifies the conditions under which such communication is more or less successful. It examines the expectations of our theory comparatively across five prominent global or regional IOs (EU, IMF, NAFTA, UN, and WTO) based on nationally representative samples of respondents in three countries (Germany, the UK, and the US). A key finding of the chapter is that communication by more credible elites (member governments and NGOs) tends to have stronger effects on citizens' legitimacy perceptions than communication by less credible elites (IOs themselves).

Chapter 5 turns to domestically active elites and examines the conditions under which political parties are influential in shaping public perceptions of IO legitimacy. While we know from previous research that political parties are powerful communicators about domestic political matters, we know less about the effects of party cues on global political issues. The chapter explores this topic based on party communication regarding two IOs (NATO and UN) in two countries (Germany and the US), which vary in the degree of political polarization. It finds that party cues almost exclusively shape legitimacy beliefs toward NATO and the UN in the highly polarized US setting, while few effects are detected in the less polarized German context.

Chapter 6 then shifts the principal focus from elites to the contents of messages, examining whether and to what extent information about the procedures and performances of IOs affects citizens' legitimacy beliefs. It examines this issue comparatively across seven IOs in different issue areas (AU, EU, IMF, NAFTA, UNSC, and UNFCCC) based on nationally representative samples from four countries in diverse world regions (Germany, the Philippines, South Africa, and the US). It finds that information about both procedures and performances impacts legitimacy beliefs. Moreover, within procedure and performance, communicated qualities of democracy, effectiveness, and fairness all matter for citizens' legitimacy perceptions.

Chapter 7 extends the analysis to also consider, for the first time, the impact of information on the authority and purpose of IOs. In addition, it shifts to an experimental design that allows for an assessment of how these institutional qualities matter when simultaneously communicated to citizens. It examines this issue across hypothetical IOs and based on nationally representative samples in two countries (Germany and the US), which vary in ways that may shape citizens'

receptivity to communication about the authority and purpose of IOs specifically. The chapter establishes that citizens are sensitive to information about an IO's authority and purpose when forming legitimacy beliefs. However, such effects are conditioned by people's political priors. In the US, we find evidence that information about an IO's authority has a weaker negative effect on citizens with internationalist attitudes, while citizens with different partisan identification value the varying social purposes of an IO differently. In Germany, we do not find such conditioning effects.

Chapter 8 summarizes the empirical findings of the previous chapters and outlines the implications of the book's results for our understanding of politics in four areas: legitimacy and legitimation, elite communication and public opinion, elite influence and democratic politics, and the contemporary backlash against IOs.