Centre for

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Legitimation and delegitimation in global cooperation (2021–2024)

Frank Gadinger, Patricia Rinck, Nina Schneider, Jan Aart Scholte

Introduction: legitimation and deligitimation

Legitimacy – and its contestation – is a vital question for global cooperation. With legitimacy a governing power is seen to have the right to rule and to exercise it appropriately. Legitimation involves processes whereby authority gains and sustains legitimacy, while delegitimation involves its decline and loss. We consider legitimacy from both a normative, i.e. determined by moral judgement, and sociological perspective, i.e. observed in political behaviour.

Scholars from various disciplines have usually examined legitimacy and (de)legitimation in relation to the state. In recent debates, however, legitimacy is understood as a fragile, politicized, and contested phenomenon involving a wider range of political forces such as multilateral institutions, private global governance, and transnational social movements. Christian Reus-Smit encapsulated this as 'politics of legitimation', advocating for a consideration of diverse power relations, a broad variety of public voices, and new forms of resistance against formal authorities. Although his plea remains rather vague in terms of how to conceptualize and study the multidimensionality of politics of (de)legitimation, his article triggered further debates on how to deal with the changing premise that legitimacy is gained and maintained through a diverse arrangement of actors and a variety of material activities, political strategies, practices, narratives, images, objects, and discourses. This relational perspective has been adopted in recent works by sociologists (e.g. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot), historians (e.g. Ian Kershaw), political theorists (e.g. Pierre Rosanvallon) and lawyers (e.g. Christoph Möllers). It further underlines that normatives disputes should not be regarded as a systemic error (as state-centred concepts implicitly suggest), but as a normal and often productive source for democratic politics and practices of global cooperation.

Research aims and rationale

The major aim of this research stream is to foreground the processual relationship between legitimation and delegitimation in global cooperation. We seek to investigate how legitimation and delegitimation processes are interrelated and mutually influential in shaping amounts, types and directions of global cooperation. Using the term 'politics of legitimation' as a starting point, we understand such processes as the ongoing public interplay between actions to undermine (delegitimise) and promote (legitimatise) around issues of global cooperation in many sites of political controversy. The core question for this theme is: *through what processes*, and *with what*

consequences actors and institutions involved in global cooperation obtain or lose legitimacy. A better understanding of legitimation and delegitimation processes, particularly under conditions of polycentric governing arrangements, is vital to clarify how global cooperation works. It helps to systematize theoretical insights and empirical results on how and why actors and institutions engage in or boycott global cooperation efforts; how and why actors and forms of global cooperation change over time: and how and why specific concerns (e.g. women's rights, climate change) gain or lose pertinence in global cooperation over time.

In overcoming the narrow focus of the creation and loss of legitimacy in global politics through states, a relational notion of legitimacy presents new conceptual, theoretical, and methodological challenges. It aims to consider politicization processes and power relations across scales (at local, national and transnational levels), a broad spectrum of political actors in their complex relationships, and new forms of resistance against formal authorities (e.g. by whistleblowers, young climate activists, right-wing networks). Sites of resistance to global cooperation include – but are not limited to – civil society associations, social movements, and everyday practices of ordinary citizens. Delegitimation of global cooperation can come from 'left-wing' and 'right-wing' angles, from communitarians as well as cosmopolitans.

Our research stream gives equal attention to legitimation and delegitimation. We thereby consider political disputes beyond established institutional sites (e.g. parliaments) and include legitimacy claims by average citizens. Furthermore, this inclusive approach can appeal to fellows from diverse academic disciplines (from the humanities as well as social sciences), theoretical orientations, and world regions. The overall objective is to advance transdisciplinary dialogues including these different yet related concepts and manifold research methodologies. The research stream's focus on the interplay between legitimation and delegitimation in global cooperation builds upon and extends the Centre's previous research on conceptualizing puzzling phenomena around pathways and polycentric governing.

Research questions and approaches

Fellows are welcome to explore processes of (de-)legitimation in global cooperation from a variety of theoretical backgrounds, conceptual approaches and research methodologies. One possibility for analyzing the politics of legitimation relates to normative criteria of (de-)legitimizing global cooperation. This approach may study if and how normative criteria are currently changing. The credibility of the liberal narrative, for instance, has recently been attacked including its core promise to increase welfare, growth, and liberty for all citizens. Research questions may include: How do the global rise of (right-wing) populism and other alternatives (e.g. China) to the liberal world order challenge the normative grounds on which political actors base their support for global cooperation? What are the consequences of these normative changes in global cooperation? Is the rising opposition to liberal global cooperation a new phenomenon or can we observe similar movements in history (e.g. fascism in the 1930s-1940s)? Another research strand might seek to measure legitimacy in the changing beliefs of elites and citizens across the globe. To what extent, scholars may ask, do these changes expose different or common normative grounds which enable or hinder global cooperation?

Another option involves a micro-oriented research perspective on competing legitimacy claims. They may help to reveal different underlying normative backgrounds and power relations. Questions may include: What role do discourses, cultural repertoires, material culture, and sociability play in legitimation disputes? An alternative approach involves *longue durée* perspectives on (de-)legitimation disputes about a 'global' concern, an approach that has the potential to connect the micro and macro perspective. This stream may ask: How did global cooperation work before the age of national or global governance institutions? How have norms and concepts used in legitimization disputes evolved as they have globalized or traveled across the regions? Research may also focus on

new political actors, artists, and activists like Greta Thunberg and on right-wing networks, and investigate how these protagonists have impacted legitimacy discourses in global cooperation processes. This research could address questions like: How and why do some protest movements succeed and others fail? Can these critical voices be described as new or have there been similar actors throughout history? How do forms of critique change over time (social media, visuality)?

In sum, numerous more specific research topics on legitimation and delegitimation in global cooperation suggest themselves. We warmly welcome researchers to explore the theme across from diverse academic disciplines, conceptual approaches and research methodologies.