Abstract

In this report, we present recent research on elite and citizen perceptions of international organization legitimacy, discuss the evidence in light of the Stockholm+50 challenges and beyond, and derive forward-looking proposals for how to build trust in the UN. Specifically, we map legitimacy beliefs toward six key international organizations, among them the UN, drawing on uniquely coordinated elite and citizen survey data from Brazil, Germany, the Philippines, Russia and the US. We find a notable elite–citizen gap for all six organizations studied, in four of the five countries, and for all six different elite types. We discuss our results with a view to three core aspects of the UN Common Agenda: “build trust”, “leave no one behind” and “listen to and work with youth”. By way of conclusion, we make three proposals for building trust in the UN, privileging raising awareness about the legitimacy gap, communication about UN procedures and performances, and engagement with young people for the sake of more legitimate policy solutions.

Key messages

- Gaps between elite and citizen perceptions toward international organizations are pervasive across countries, organizations and elite types.

- Increased awareness of the elite–citizen gap can orient elites toward actions that build trust especially in environmental governance.

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Introduction: Stockholm+50 and legitimacy in global governance

Legitimacy – the public’s belief that a political institution exercises its power appropriately – has considerable implications for global policy. Without the durable support conferred by legitimacy beliefs of citizens, international organizations such as the UN can struggle to obtain resources, attract participation, make decisions, and generally advance with handling critical transboundary problems. Proliferating sustainability challenges have encouraged notable expansions of global policy, but the legitimacy of governing beyond the state also remains deeply in question. Think only of stalled global climate agreements, weak intergenerational justice, and fragmented approaches to biodiversity loss.

A particular headline issue around legitimacy in global governance is the relationship between elites – here understood as individuals in leading positions in society and politics – and citizens at large. Episodes such as Brexit and the rise of populism suggest a possible divergence in views of global governance between political and societal leaders on the one hand and citizens on the other. A common argument purports that today’s elites, as the main winners of globalization, are out of touch with ordinary citizens, who bear the brunt of its burdens. The alleged result is a shortfall in effective and democratic global cooperation (Dellmuth et al., 2022a, b).

These issues are crucially important for the Stockholm+50 meeting, for which the core themes – climate change, biodiversity losses, as well as pollution and waste – have pronounced global characteristics. For over a century, people have debated the role of public acceptance of global goals among citizens to achieve change. The Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, 1973) stated that achieving global environmental goals “will demand the acceptance of responsibility by citizens and communities and by enterprises and institutions at every level, all sharing equitably in common efforts” (p. 3). Both then and today, this achievement only becomes possible if citizens, across generations and socio-economic backgrounds, regard the UN as a legitimate actor.

These observations underline the need for a firm evidence base regarding how much citizens and elites around the world actually regard international organizations to be legitimate, how large the supposed elite–citizen legitimacy gap is, and how the gap can be reduced. Elite–citizen tensions are a recurrent theme in the long history of global governance. A hundred years ago, critics alleged that liberal elites were out of touch with the masses over the League of Nations (Petrucelli, 2020) in the 1990s, citizen demonstrations against “neoliberalism” became a concern for global economic institutions (O’Brien et al., 2000). During the 2010s, citizen critiques eventually extended to global governance, in part due to the rise of populism (Hobolt, 2016).

A burgeoning body of literature in the field of International Relations has examined the legitimacy of international organizations in the eyes of ordinary citizens (Harteveld et al., 2013; Hooghe & Marks, 2005). In particular, legitimacy beliefs have been examined in the context of anti-globalist populism (Inglehart & Norris 2017; Rodrik 2018). In terms of explanatory approaches, previous research has shown that legitimacy beliefs are shaped by the circumstances of an individual (Harteveld et al., 2013; Hooghe & Marks, 2005). Another approach has focused on the features of governing organizations, such as their procedures and performances, as sources of legitimacy beliefs (Dellmuth et al., 2019; Scharpf, 1999). Yet another approach argues that legitimacy beliefs are shaped by the wider social structure, such as cultural norms and political regimes (Bernstein, 2011; Scholte, 2018).
Taking these approaches into account, this report discusses the patterns and sources of the elite–citizen legitimacy gap. This information should inform domestic and international policymakers, non-governmental organization representatives, and other non-state actors in global governance, ahead of the Stockholm+50 conference on the importance of legitimacy for three core aspects of the UN Common Agenda: “build trust”, “leave no one behind” and “listen to and work with youth”. After presenting our empirical findings, we sketch three proposals for how to build trust in the UN more effectively.

**Background and findings: patterns and sources of trust**

We have worked to find answers to the questions: Is there a gap between elite and citizen legitimacy beliefs toward international organizations, and if so, why? In several recent studies we have offered a groundbreaking comparative analysis of this issue (Dellmuth et al., 2022a, b; Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2022). In the following, we discuss the evidence in these studies and offer a series of new analyses of relevance to the “build trust”, “leave no one behind” and “listen to and work with youth” themes crucial to the UN Common Agenda and Stockholm+50.

**Patterns of legitimacy: Is there an elite–citizen legitimacy gap?**

To study if and why there is an elite–citizen legitimacy gap in global governance, we focused on two sets of major international organizations. The first have mandates in economic governance: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO); the second, sustainable development governance: the International Criminal Court, the UN and the World Health Organization (WHO). We also focus on five countries: Brazil, Germany, the Philippines, Russia and the US, which allows us to examine elite–citizen gaps under diverse societal, political and economic conditions.

To measure legitimacy beliefs, we have conducted two coordinated surveys during 2017–2019. First, citizen beliefs have been measured by inserting a battery of questions into the World Value Survey 7 (WVS7). Since its launch in 1981, the World Values Survey Association (WVSA), a non-commercial non-governmental social research organization based in Stockholm, has executed seven cycles, or “waves”, of data collection, each of which lasts five years. The WVS7 sample sizes in our five countries comprise 1762 respondents in Brazil, 1528 in Germany, 1200 in the Philippines, 1810 in Russia, and 2596 in the US (Haerpfer et al., 2019).

Second, to measure elite attitudes, we use data from the Legitimacy in Global Governance (LegGov) Elite Survey, funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond. That survey contains data from 599 elite interviews in the same countries. We interviewed at least 100 elites per country in six sectors: business, civil society, media, research, government agencies and political parties. The survey targeted not only internationally active elites, but also domestically oriented ones. The survey results thus hold for elites as a whole and not just leaders with international vocations (Verhaegen et al., 2019).

The measure of legitimacy beliefs is the same in both surveys, based on a question about whether people have “no confidence at all” (score 0), “not very much confidence” (score 1), “quite a lot of confidence” (score 2) or “a great deal of confidence” (score 3) in the six global economic and sustainability organizations. The results allow our analysis
to speak to the aspect of “building trust” in multilateralism, which is central in the UN Common Agenda.

What have we found? To begin with, **elites express more confidence in international organizations than citizens have**. Figure 1 pools the data from all countries and elite types to show the size of the elite–citizen gap for all six international organizations, combined, for each organization individually, and as a point of comparison for the respondents’ national governments in the five countries. The mean confidence among citizens for all six international organizations combined is 1.4 on the scale between “no confidence at all” (score 0) and “a great deal of confidence” (score 3), while the mean confidence among elites is 1.8. The gap of 0.4 implies that the surveyed elites on average have 30% more confidence in these organizations than the surveyed citizens.

The **elite–citizen gap is larger for sustainable development organizations such as the UN than for economic organizations, and a similar gap is evident for national governments**. Figure 1 also shows that the gap is largest with respect to the UN (0.6) and smallest for the WTO (0.3). This is mainly driven by the fact that elites show markedly higher confidence for sustainable development organizations than economic organizations, while citizen support for both categories of international organizations is more evenly distributed. That said, these gaps are not limited to international organizations, as a similar gap in confidence prevails for national governments (0.4)

![Figure 1. Legitimacy gap by international organizations (IO) and national government (Gov.).](image)

Note: Data from Dellmuth et al (2022a, b). Graph shows mean values for all five countries, comparing elites with citizens in their respective countries. Differences in mean confidence between elites and citizens are statistically significant for each organization ($p < 0.001$). Due to rounding, some totals for the average gap may not correspond with the difference between the elite and citizen averages.
The gap prevails in all countries. Figure 2 displays the gap in confidence between elites and citizens in the five countries viewed separately, pooling responses across all organizations and elite types. The gap is largest in Brazil (0.6) and smallest in the Philippines, where the gap is actually negative (-0.1), as elites are on average slightly more sceptical than citizens. The pattern for the Philippines deviates because citizens in this country are more positive than elites toward the economic organizations (IMF, World Bank, WTO), while having nearly as much confidence as elites in the other organizations.

The gap is largest among bureaucratic elites and citizens. Figure 3 presents the gap in relation to different elite types, pooling responses across all international organizations and countries. While all five elite types have higher confidence in international organizations than citizens, bureaucratic elites have the highest gap at 0.6 and civil society elites have the lowest at 0.2. If this gap is understood to be indicative of a disconnect between bureaucratic elites and citizens, it might uncover a deficit in democratic accountability citizens can exercise against bureaucratic elites.

These observations beg the question of whether elites are aware of the gap. The LegGov Elite Survey data suggest that while elites have a mean confidence-level of 1.8 in international organizations, they on average estimate that citizens have a mean confidence-level of 1.7. The perceived gap of 0.1 is significantly smaller than the actual elite–citizen legitimacy gap of 0.4.

Taken together, optimists can interpret this evidence to show that the widely touted “crisis of multilateralism” is an exaggeration, certainly with regard to elite circles. Average elite and citizen opinion is supportive of existing global governance, and far from demanding its contraction. As per Figure 1, average elite and citizen confidence in global arrangements is similar to that for national governments and regional institutions. However, the cup is also half-empty. Nowhere do elites or citizens have high confidence in existing global governance. And a pervasive elite–citizen legitimacy gap exists in the context of all organizations, countries and elite types examined, which elites tend to underestimate.
Figure 2. Legitimacy gap by country.

Note: Data from Dellmuth et al (2022a, b). Graph shows mean values encompassing all international organizations, comparing elites with citizens in their respective countries. Differences in mean confidence between elites and citizens are statistically significant for each country (p < 0.05 for the Philippines, p < 0.001 for the other countries). Due to rounding, some totals for the average gap may not correspond with the difference between the elite and citizen averages.

Figure 3. Legitimacy gap by elite type.

Note: Data from Dellmuth et al (2022a, b). Graph shows mean values for all international organizations, comparing elite types with citizens. Differences in mean confidence are statistically significant for each elite type (p < 0.001). Due to rounding, some totals for the average gap may not correspond with the difference between the elite and citizen averages.
Behind the legitimacy gap

Here, we take a closer look at what shapes citizen legitimacy beliefs, paying particular attention to two individual-level sources of citizen beliefs toward global governance: age and socio-economic status. While the sources of legitimacy are complex, we highlight these two factors because they are central to the principles of “leaving no one behind” and “listen to and work with youth” in the UN Common Agenda. We close this section with an analysis of elite and citizen preferences for democracy and efficiency in global governance.

Individual-level factors

Age. Previous research shows that younger people tend to have more confidence in national authorities (Tyler & Trinker, 2017) and international organizations (Dellmuth et al., 2022) than the working and elderly population. The general logic behind the relationship between age and legitimacy beliefs toward different types of political organizations is that interest in and potential scepticism toward the specific functioning of politics and government in general typically increases when young people enter adulthood. Adolescents tend to relate to legal rules through a social lens, recognizing that the law facilitates social interaction and organizes society. During late adolescence and around the legal age, young people start relating to legal rules differently, as they are better able to evaluate principles of justice and concrete laws (Neundorf et al., 2013).

However, young people’s confidence in governance institutions is eroding and differs widely across countries (OECD, 2020). At the global level, we have seen this in the protest activities of several million young people against climate policies since 2019. Our data suggest that age matters for the elite–citizen legitimacy gap. Younger citizens tend to have a more favourable view of international organizations in the observed countries (Figure 4). Disaggregating the data for citizens, we find that a relationship between age and confidence is particularly pronounced for the UN and the WTO (Dellmuth et al., 2022a, b).
Political values. Political values have been suggested to shape attitudes toward global governance, in relation to the classic left–right spectrum, as well as in terms of green alternative liberal (GAL) and traditional authoritarian nationalist (TAN) values (Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks 2019; Inglehart and Norris 2017). The expectation is that individuals who hold left-wing and GAL values are more likely to be supportive of international cooperation than individuals who hold right-wing and TAN values. Dellmuth et al. (2021) found that political values primarily matter in the US, where elite–citizen differences in left–right and GAL–TAN orientations are associated with confidence in international organizations in the anticipated direction. The survey data also suggest that confidence in the UN is stronger among citizens with GAL values than those with TAN values in Germany and the US.

Socio-economic status. This argument draws on research that emphasizes self-interest and people’s position in the economy as central to the formation of opinions on international matters (Mayda and Rodrik 2005; Rodrik 2018). Elites have accumulated more human and financial capital than ordinary citizens, which puts them in a position to benefit from the redistributive effects of economic globalization. Indeed, we find that gaps in both education and financial satisfaction levels between elites and citizens have considerable sway in determining legitimacy gaps (Dellmuth et al., 2022a, b).

Disaggregating the results, we see that socio-economic status is of greater importance for elite–citizen gaps related to economic organizations than sustainable development organizations. This result may reflect distributional consequences from economic organizations that generally favour elites relative to citizens at large (Dellmuth et al. 2022). Delving more into the data from citizen responses, those who are more satisfied with the financial situation of their household report that they have more confidence in the UN (Figure 5).
Geographical identification. Individuals who are more positive toward the EU tend to identify more strongly as European than those who do not (Carey, 2002; Hooghe & Marks, 2005). We extrapolate these findings to the broader context of international organizations by making the assumption that support for global governance is connected to having a global identity, as opposed to an identity associated with a nation state. Differences in geographical identification are found to be associated with elite–citizen legitimacy gaps in Russia and the US. In these two countries, elites who feel a greater belonging to the world than citizens tend to accord more legitimacy to international organizations. However, in Brazil, Germany and the Philippines, few or no organizations show the expected relationship (Dellmuth et al., 2022a, b).

Domestic institutional trust. Individuals’ trust in domestic institutions tends to be related to their trust in international organizations (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2020; Harteveld et al., 2013). We found that elite–citizen differences regarding confidence in government are nearly always positively associated with gaps in legitimacy beliefs. The rare exceptions are the International Criminal Court in the Philippines and three international organizations in the US: the International Criminal Court, World Bank and WTO. The partial exception in the US may relate to the contextual circumstance that with a more polarized political climate, trust in national government is less about an elite–citizen divide and more a function of which party is in control at a given time (Dellmuth et al., 2022a, b).

Elite Communication. We have specifically studied if individual citizens adjust their legitimacy beliefs depending on the messages and the elites conveying these messages. A series of experiments conducted in surveys among nationally representative samples in Germany, the UK and the US suggests that this is the case. Citizens were found to adjust their opinions when elites in domestic governments, civil society organizations or international organizations themselves criticize or endorse international organizations. The highest impact on legitimacy beliefs is seen when governments and civil society organizations communicate about international organizations, as opposed to when international organizations communicate about themselves (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2021).

Organizational factors

The experiments reported in the previous section were also designed to assess to what extent citizens base their legitimacy beliefs on the procedure and performance of international organizations. Procedure can pertain to accountability, fairness, participation and transparency, whereas performances pertain to how international organizations fare in terms of solving important problems. Both organizational factors were found to affect beliefs to a largely equal degree (Dellmuth et al. 2019).

Examining our survey data further helps us understand whether elite and citizen preferences for democracy or efficiency in global governance diverge. A gap in preferences can be considered when undertaking reform and engaging in political communication. As illustrated in Figure 6, elite and citizen preferences for performance or procedure in international organizations overlap to a large degree. The exception is Russia, where citizens have a stronger preference for democratic procedure than elites.
Proposals: Build trust in the UN

1. AWARENESS OF THE ELITE–CITIZEN LEGITIMACY GAP:

The UN should promote awareness of the elite–citizen legitimacy gap in global governance.

In this report we find a notable elite–citizen legitimacy gap vis-à-vis international organizations, which elites in general tend to underestimate. The disconnect in legitimacy beliefs risks undermining democratic accountability and effectiveness of global governance. The legitimacy gap also poses a risk in that it could weaken trust more generally; trust is a core value expressed in the UN Common Agenda.

Given the confidence gaps between elites and young people, as well as between elites and people with a lower socio-economic status, the legitimacy gap bears the risk of limiting the UN’s ability to follow up on the commitment to “leave no one behind” and “listen to and work with youth”. We recommend that the UN promote awareness of the gap among domestic and global policymakers, non-governmental organization representatives, and other actors working in relation to global governance.

2. PROCEDURE AND PERFORMANCE AFFECT THE LEGITIMACY GAP:

The UN should communicate about both democratic procedure and effective performance to build trust.

This report shows that when forming trust in international organizations, elites and citizens tend to care about both procedures and performances, in contrast to a common populist narrative that citizens care foremost about democratic procedure in international organizations (see Rodrik, 2018). This overlap in elite and citizen preferences underlines the potential of finding common ground in ongoing and planned efforts to build trust in global governance reform. We recommend that the UN use these insights to communicate consistently about both procedures and performances to build confidence in its policies and reforms.
3. ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE: The UN should engage more with young people and invest in a better understanding of young people’s legitimacy beliefs.

This report suggests that legitimacy beliefs are stronger among younger citizens. Young people, who are important stakeholders of Stockholm+50 and the UN at large, tend to be more positively predisposed toward global governance; however, their confidence in governance in general is diminishing, which poses risks for youth confidence in global governance. At the same time, it is important to recognize that confidence in the UN tends to be lower among the elderly. In sum, the UN should work more strategically to understand the perceptions of international organizations among young people, as well as to reduce intergenerational inequalities and bolster cooperative values, which can create synergies in the quest of building trust in international organizations among generations.

Conclusion

Global problems grow, but global governance does not – certainly not commensurate to the claimed need to solve environmental problems. Why? A good part of the complicated answer may lie with the legitimacy challenge.

In this report, we have presented and discussed recent evidence on the patterns and sources of legitimacy beliefs in international organizations. We report a notable elite–citizen gap for all six organizations, four of the five countries, and all six different elite types studied. Elites on average underestimate this legitimacy gap. This gap can be attributed to a complex set of individual, societal and organizational factors, of which we have highlighted age and socio-economic status (see also Dellmuth et al. 2022a, b).

These findings are based on a sample of six international organizations in five countries, during the years 2017–2019. While this is the most comprehensive assessment of the elite–citizen legitimacy gap to date, we need more studies on broader selections of organizations and countries to be able to draw general conclusions.

Moreover, while there were no major global events that may have broadly affected the legitimacy gap during the time span observed, our findings should only be cautiously generalized to other time periods, and future research on other time periods is necessary.

All told, the results shed light on opportunities and constraints in future global governance on sustainability. Collaboration at a global level is necessary to address transnational challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss and generational injustices.

Exactly how pivotal legitimacy is for the effectiveness of global governance is not evident (Suchman, 1995; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Yet, assuming that legitimacy among citizens and elites, on balance, is positive for international organizations, our findings lead us to urge the UN to increase awareness of the elite–citizen legitimacy gap, communicate about both procedures and performances of the UN, and engage more with global governance sceptics connected to the Stockholm+50 conference and beyond. With varying shades of moderate backing among citizens and elites, the UN appears to have sufficient legitimacy to continue its current functions, but greater legitimacy would enable the organization to more effectively handle the sustainability challenges that lie ahead.


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