

Agents, audiences and peers: why international organizations diversify their legitimization discourse

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In February 2021, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)—the Pacific’s most influential regional international organization—faced a severe legitimacy crisis when nearly one-third of its members withdrew from membership. Frustrated by the defiance of a longstanding convention that the leadership of PIF cycles through the three major subregions of the organization, the presidents of Micronesia, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru and Palau declared that they no longer saw ‘value in participating in an organization that does not respect established agreements, including the gentlemen’s agreement on sub-regional rotation’.¹ To counter this delegitimation, the forum chair—Tuvalu’s Prime Minister Kausea Natano—conjured the organization’s unity by suggesting that solving this crisis would require ‘continued dialogue about what we each seek, compromise for the greater regional good, the reaching of consensus based on our Pacific ways and traditions, and ultimately unity and solidarity’.²

This dispute illustrates a vital activity of international organizations (IOs): they regularly assert legitimacy by invoking norms in public communication which they claim to espouse or embody. Such legitimization discourse has long emphasized functional problem-solving, but recent research shows that some IOs

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¹ Micronesian presidents’ summit 2021 (virtual), *MPS leaders meeting: Micronesian presidents’ February 2021 communiqué*, p. 1, https://gov.fm/files/MPS_Leaders_Meeting_-_Communique_2021_Feb.pdf, last accessed 1 Dec. 2022. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 8 Oct. 2022.)

² Pacific Islands Forum (virtual), *2021 Pacific Islands Forum leaders 51st meeting: opening remarks by outgoing forum chair, Tuvalu Prime Minister, Hon. Kausea Natano*, available at <https://www.forumsec.org/2021/08/06/fcfinal-forum51/>, last accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

have diversified their legitimacy claims.³ Today, some IOs with a clear economic mandate, such as the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), cite diverse norms, including democracy, national sovereignty, functional capability and security, while IOs with a broad policy mandate, such as the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), espouse targeted claims that highlight the norm of economic cooperation. Between these opposites, we observe gradual differences in discursive legitimation across IOs and over time, as we demonstrate below.

These differences in what we term the *normative diversity* of discursive legitimation present us with a puzzle. Relevant audiences are likely to have diverse normative expectations of IOs, suggesting the benefit of diffuse legitimacy claims. Communication scholars, on the other hand, argue that clear messages are easier to understand and, therefore, more likely to have the desired impact on recipients, implying that targeted claims may be preferable.⁴ The remarkable variation in our data is difficult to reconcile with both perspectives' expectation of relative homogeneity, raising questions about the origins of variation in the legitimation discourse of IOs.

We offer the first comprehensive analysis of normative diversity in IOs' discursive legitimation, using a novel dataset that contains information on norm-based justifications in 32,675 paragraphs of text published by 28 regional IOs from 1980 to 2019. Our theoretical argument starts from the premise that agents seek to balance two potentially opposing goals in constructing a legitimation discourse. First, they seek clarity in their normative messages, which is best served by targeted legitimation. Second, they seek to construct normative messages that resonate with the actors that shape an IO's discursive legitimation. Thus, more diffuse legitimacy claims become desirable as the actors engaged in IO legitimation diversify. Drawing on Lenz and Söderbaum, we theorize the influence of three sets of actors.⁵ First, we expect normative diversity to be greater when the normative beliefs of the *agents* that construct legitimacy claims are more heterogeneous. Second, we expect IO legitimation to diversify with the heterogeneity of the *audiences* that IOs aim to address. Third, we propose that normative diversity increases when an IO overlaps with other international organizations and receives normative signals from diverse *peers*.

We find empirical support for the influence of all sets of actors. First, the heterogeneity of normative beliefs among IO agents is associated with higher normative diversity. Second, IO agents diversify their legitimacy claims to address heterogeneous audiences with access to IO decision-making. Finally, our results support the neglected perspective that isomorphic processes shape discursive legitimation.

³ Klaus Dingwerth, Henning Schmidtke and Tobias Weise, 'The rise of democratic legitimation: why international organizations speak the language of democracy', *European Journal of International Relations* 26: 2, 2020, pp. 714–41; Christian Rauh and Michael Zürn, 'Authority, politicization, and alternative justifications: endogenous legitimation dynamics in global economic governance', *Review of International Political Economy* 27: 3, 2020, pp. 583–611; Jens Steffek, *International organization as technocratic utopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁴ See Arthur C. Graesser, Keith K. Millis and Rolf A. Zwaan, 'Discourse comprehension', *Annual Review of Psychology* 48: 1, 1997, pp. 163–89.

⁵ Tobias Lenz and Fredrik Söderbaum, 'Legitimation strategies in international organizations', *International Affairs* 99: 4, 2023, pp. 899–920 at p. 901.

We find that membership and policy overlap between IOs is associated with more normative diversity—a finding that resonates with work on the consequences of organizational overlap, which remains a major lacuna.⁶ Overall, our findings show that IOs' discursive legitimation is responsive to the growing complexity of international cooperation. As agents, audiences and organizational peers become more normatively heterogeneous, discursive legitimation must engage with the deep pluralism that characterizes today's international order.⁷

This situation creates both opportunities and challenges for policy-makers. Our findings imply that policy-makers can act as norm entrepreneurs to emphasize norms beyond technocratic problem-solving. At the same time, our results point to sources of potential friction that constrain policy-makers' work and may hamper successful legitimation, since more diverse and potentially conflicting normative demands strive for recognition. A key challenge thus lies in reconciling the legitimation pressures from various actors without generating apparent contradictions.

The article is organized in four sections. In the next section, we conceptualize and describe patterns of normative diversity in discursive legitimation. In the third section, we develop our theoretical argument, and in the fourth section we present the empirical analysis. The concluding section summarizes our findings and highlights the implications for the theory and practice of international affairs.

The normative diversity of discursive legitimation

We define discursive legitimation as generalizable justifications of an IO's competence in governance made by IO representatives, including both staff and member states.⁸ These justifications offer norm-based reasons why an IO's existence is desirable and aim to generate a 'reservoir of favorable attitudes or good will that helps members to accept or tolerate outputs to which they are opposed or the effect of which they see as damaging their wants'.⁹ Rationalizations that invoke the cost-benefit calculations of individual members fall outside the realm of legitimation because they aim to generate specific support that builds on individual members' preferences.¹⁰ Legitimation is generalizable in that it refers to the IO as an organizational whole, not individual actors or particular policies. It is norm-based because it relates to some socially constructed system of norms, values and beliefs. Discursive legitimation may highlight a variety of norms, such as functional capabilities and expertise, legality and international fairness, or democratic decision-making

⁶ Karen J. Alter and Kal Raustiala, 'The rise of international regime complexity', *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 14: 1, 2018, pp. 329–49 at p. 341; Benjamin Faude and Felix Große-Kreul, 'Let's justify! How regime complexes enhance the normative legitimacy of global governance', *International Studies Quarterly* 64: 2, 2020, pp. 431–9.

⁷ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, *The making of global International Relations: origins and evolution of IR at its centenary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), esp. ch. 9.

⁸ Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt, 'Self-legitimation in the face of politicization: why international organizations centralized public communication', *Review of International Organizations* 13: 4, 2018, pp. 519–46.

⁹ David Easton, *A systems analysis of political life* (New York: Wiley, 1965), p. 273.

¹⁰ Henning Schmidtke, 'Elite legitimation and delegitimation of international organizations in the media: patterns and explanations', *Review of International Organizations* 14: 4, 2019, pp. 633–59.

procedures.¹¹ We conceive of normative diversity as the breadth of norms IO agents highlight in their public communication. While agents may decide to focus on a small set of norms and thus provide targeted legitimation, they also have the option to use a wide array of norms and therefore present a more diffuse normative message.

Normative diversity has important implications for the theory and practice of international affairs. Most directly, it is a crucial determinant of the effectiveness of discursive legitimation. Research in communication studies shows that the content of a message, i.e. the clarity of the argument and its resonance with audiences, shapes its impact on recipients' attitudes and behaviour.¹² Further, many IOs lack the resources to coerce or bribe member states into compliance, which means that they must rely on alternative governance tools. Public communication is one of these. By invoking norms in discourse, IOs aim to promote these norms and persuade audiences of their value.¹³ Yet invoking diverse norms runs the risk of engendering internal contradictions, a theme to which we return in the conclusion.

Moreover, normative diversity provides insights into IOs' organizational cultures and how IOs implement their mandate. As Weber recognized, 'according to the kind of legitimacy which is claimed, the type of obedience, the kind of administrative staff developed to guarantee it, and the mode of exercising authority, will differ fundamentally'.¹⁴ From this perspective, a high degree of normative diversity may make it harder for IO leaders to affirm a cohesive institutional identity, 'one that is aligned with the values and principles espoused by the organization',¹⁵ because the organization is more likely to experience tensions between these values and principles. Finally, the structure of IOs' discursive legitimation reveals the extent to which the diagnosed normative change in global governance that IOs follow 'a longer and more diverse list of legitimacy standards'¹⁶ has 'trickled down' to the regional level.

¹¹ Martin Binder and Monika Heupel, 'The legitimacy of the UN Security Council: evidence from recent General Assembly debates', *International Studies Quarterly* 59: 2, 2015, pp. 238–50; Ian Hurd, 'The empire of international legalism', *Ethics and International Affairs* 32: 3, 2018, pp. 265–78; Andrea Liese, Jana Herold, Hauke Feil and Per-Olof Busch, 'The heart of bureaucratic power: explaining international bureaucracies' expert authority', *Review of International Studies* 47: 3, 2021, pp. 353–76; Steffek, *International organization as technocratic utopia*; Klaus Dingwerth, Antonia Witt, Ina Lehmann, Ellen Reichel and Tobias Weise, *International organizations under pressure: legitimating global governance in challenging times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹² Graesser et al., 'Discourse comprehension'; Edward F. McQuarrie and David Glen Mick, 'On resonance: a critical pluralistic inquiry into advertising rhetoric', *Journal of Consumer Research* 19: 2, 1992, pp. 180–97.

¹³ Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt, 'International organizations "going public"? An event history analysis of public communication reforms 1950–2015', *International Studies Quarterly* 62: 4, 2018, pp. 723–36; Martha Finnemore, 'International organizations as teachers of norms: the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization and science policy', *International Organization* 47: 4, 1993, pp. 565–97.

¹⁴ Max Weber, *Economy and society: an outline of interpretive sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 213.

¹⁵ Sarah von Billerbeck, 'Organizational narratives and self-legitimation in international organizations', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 963–81 at p. 963; Stephen C. Nelson and Catherine Weaver, 'Organizational culture', in Jacob Katz Cogan, Ian Hurd and Ian Johnstone, eds, *The Oxford handbook of international organizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 920–39.

¹⁶ Dingwerth et al., *International organizations under pressure*, p. 18.

Measuring normative diversity

IOs differ starkly in the extent to which they display targeted or diffuse discursive legitimation.¹⁷ We describe empirical patterns based on a new dataset on the legitimation discourse of 28 regional IOs from 1980 to 2019. A regional IO is a formal international organization composed of three or more geographically proximate states.¹⁸ Our sample spans all major world regions (Africa, the Americas, Asia-Pacific and Europe) and cross-regional IOs. Since the selected IOs are among the most authoritative and resource-rich ones in the post-Second World War era,¹⁹ we expect their discursive legitimation to matter. The time period examined is sufficiently long to capture shifts in the normative convictions of agents, audiences and peers while being a pragmatic choice because going further back in time imposes growing constraints on the availability and accessibility of data sources.

We map normative diversity on the basis of annual reports issued by IO secretariats and the communiqués of meetings of heads of state and government. These sources have several advantages that make them preferable over press releases, speeches by IO leaders or social media communications. First, IOs take the drafting of these documents seriously, investing considerable time and resources in them. The drafting process generally encompasses various IO bodies, the head (and other departments) of the IO bureaucracy, and member-state representatives.²⁰ Second, most of these documents are publicly available. Third, they are published at similar intervals across organizations and over long periods, and their structure and intent are similar. These documents' broad comparability is an important advantage over other potential sources.²¹

The dataset is structured around IO-years as the unit of analysis,²² with the paragraphs of selected documents as the 'natural language' coding unit (we coded 32,675 paragraphs).²³ For each IO-year, we measured normative diversity as the count of normative standards an IO uses in its discursive legitimation. The analysis involves three steps. First, given the length of the documents,²⁴ we focus on sections that provide an overview of normative commitments and present organizations' philosophy, identity and desired public image. These sections encompass general overviews, summaries, forewords, introductions and conclusions.

¹⁷ We provide additional data and methodological information in an online appendix, available at <https://tobiaslenz.com/publications/agents-audiences-and-peers-why-international-organizations-diversify-their-discursive-legitimation/>.

¹⁸ Yoram Z. Haftel, 'Commerce and institutions: trade, scope, and the design of regional economic organizations', *Review of International Organizations* 8: 3, 2013, pp. 389–414 at p. 394; Jon Pevehouse, Timothy Nordstrom and Kevin Warnke, 'The correlates of war 2 international governmental organizations data version 2.0', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 21: 2, 2004, pp. 101–19.

¹⁹ Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Tobias Lenz, Jeanine Bezuijen, Besir Ceka and Svet Derderyan, *Measuring international authority: a postfunctionalist theory of governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁰ Ecker-Ehrhardt, 'Self-legitimation in the face of politicization'.

²¹ Terence Halliday, Susan Block-Lieb and Bruce Carruthers, 'Rhetorical legitimation: global scripts as strategic devices of international organizations', *Socio-Economic Review* 8: 1, 2010, pp. 77–112 at p. 84.

²² It includes a total of 974 IO-years. For 37 IO-years we were unable to locate the required documents, resulting in missing values.

²³ Thomas Däubler, Kenneth Benoit, Slava Mikhaylov and Michael Laver, 'Natural sentences as valid units for coded political texts', *British Journal of Political Science* 42: 4, 2012, pp. 937–51.

²⁴ Some documents cover more than 150 pages.

Table 1: Examples of legitimation grammar

OES example: ‘The Single Market is one of the great achievements of the Union which has delivered major benefits to Europeans. It is our main asset for ensuring citizens’ welfare, inclusive growth and job creation, and the essential driver for investment and global competitiveness.’^a

Legitimation object	Evaluation	Normative standard
The EU Single Market	is legitimate because of its ...	contribution to economic welfare

OIS example: ‘The Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum was established to take advantage of the growing interdependence among Asia–Pacific economies, by facilitating economic growth for all participants and enhancing a sense of community in the region. It aims to help improve trade and economic performance and regional links for the prosperity of the people in the region.’^b

Legitimacy object	Identity/purpose	Normative standard
APEC	stands for ...	economic welfare political community

Note: O stands for legitimation object, E for evaluation, S for normative standard and I for identity.

Sources: ^a European Council, *Conclusions adopted by the European Council* (Brussels: European Council, 2018), p. 1 (emphasis added); ^b Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation, *APEC outcomes and outlook 2007* (Singapore: APEC, 2007), p. 13 (emphasis added).

Since the number of paragraphs in the selected sections varies, we calculate a 25 per cent range around the mean number of paragraphs in these sections. As a result, we code a minimum of 16 and a maximum of 28 paragraphs per document.

Next, we decide whether the selected paragraphs present a generalized justification of an IO’s governance competence. Paragraphs may contain no, one or several such legitimation statement(s). We examine these statements through two stylized grammars—the OES and the OIS grammars, where O stands for legitimation object, E for evaluation, S for normative standard and I for identity (see table 1).²⁵ The legitimation object is the organization in general, excluding officials or policies. In the OES grammar, we identify positive evaluations of the legitimation object by searching for formulations such as ‘good’, ‘great’ or ‘improve’. In line with our conceptual distinction between legitimation and cost–benefit calculation, we exclude evaluations that highlight benefits for individual members or subgroups of members. The OIS grammar describes propositions highlighting an organization’s

²⁵ Henning Schmidtke and Frank Nullmeier, ‘Political valuation analysis and the legitimacy of international organizations’, *German Policy Studies* 7: 3, 2011, pp. 117–53.

Table 2: Normative standards in the discursive legitimization of IOs

Normative domain	Normative standard	Example
Liberalism	Democracy	‘The OSCE promotes human rights, the rule of law, anti-trafficking, good governance and democratic processes.’ ^a
	Human rights	
	Rule of law	
	Environmental protection	‘The Leaders adopted the Statement on Joint Response to Climate Change as a concrete manifestation of ASEAN’s collective commitment to address climate change.’ ^b
Communitarianism	National sovereignty	‘The signing of the treaties and their full and harmonious execution constitute an unparalleled example ... of the juridical equality of States, peaceful settlement of differences, respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of States and the principle of non-intervention.’ ^c
	Political community	‘The Forum is also united by shared values, which guide all its policy making and implementation.’ ^d
	Economic community	SACU’s vision is to be ‘an economic community with equitable and sustainable development, dedicated to the welfare of its people for a common future’. ^e
Technocracy	Functional capability	‘The protection of individuals against arbitrary measures by the state falls within our expertise.’ ^f
	Economic welfare	‘ASEAN cooperation ... contributes to a better quality of life in the region.’ ^g
	Peace and security	‘[The] authority reaffirms its commitment to the peace, security, and stability of the ECOWAS regions.’ ^h
Other	International influence	‘ASEAN continued to build its external partnerships and secured a prominent role for itself in the evolving strategic architecture of East Asia.’ ⁱ
	External recognition	‘Because of our focus and tangible results, COMESA is gaining support from the international community.’ ^j
	Structural necessity	‘Only if states work together is it possible to solve the major problems of today. This is why the Council of Europe was set up in 1949; it is now Europe’s largest political organisation.’ ^k

Sources: ^a Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *2005 annual report on OSCE activities* (Vienna, 2005), p. 6; ^b Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *Annual report 2009: bridging markets, connecting peoples* (Jakarta, 2010), p. 3; ^c Organization of American States, *Annual report of the secretary general 1999–2000* (Washington, 2000), p. xiv; ^d Pacific Islands Forum, *2018 annual report* (Suva, 2018), p. 7; ^e Southern African Customs Union, *Annual report 2012: implementing a common agenda towards regional integration* (Windhoek, 2012), p. 4; ^f Council of Europe, *Council of Europe highlights 2017* (Strasbourg, 2017), p. 5; ^g Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *Annual report 2005–2006* (Jakarta, 2006), p. 1; ^h Economic Community of West African States, *Fifty-second ordinary session of the ECOWAS Authority of heads of state and government: final communiqué* (Abuja, 2017), p. 5; ⁱ Association of Southeast Asian Nations, *ASEAN annual report 2005–2006 ‘ASEAN at the centre’* (Jakarta, 2006), p. 2; ^j Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, *1998 annual report* (Lusaka, 1998), p. 5; ^k Council of Europe, *Activity report 2008* (Strasbourg, 2008), p. 7.

identity, purpose and guiding principles.²⁶ Such statements are descriptive and do not necessarily contain positive evaluations.

Finally, we map the norms highlighted in legitimation statements by using a list of 13 standards (table 2). The list includes liberal and technocratic norms that other scholars have highlighted as essential legitimation standards for IOs.²⁷ We enlarge this established norm set by adding communitarian norms that feature prominently in more recent research,²⁸ and add three standards that are prominent in our empirical material but do not fit easily into any of the three normative domains ('other').²⁹ In contrast to extant work, we do not differentiate these norms according to whether they emphasize the procedure, purpose or performance of an IO.

Building on these data, we measure normative diversity as the count of normative standards that IO agents use in their legitimation discourse per year. This ranges from 0, indicating no discursive legitimation, to 13, revealing a highly diffuse legitimation discourse.

Descriptive patterns

Figure 1 plots the average normative diversity across organizations. Some IOs, such as the OECS or the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), use little more than one normative standard per year, indicating that their legitimation is targeted. This number rises to almost eight standards for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and more than six standards for PIF, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), APEC, the Organization of American States (OAS), the European Union (EU) and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). These organizations display more diffuse discursive legitimation. Other IOs are spread between these two poles, presenting neither particularly targeted nor overly diffuse legitimation. Considering the 13-point scale of our measure, these differences are large and indicate that IOs choose markedly different approaches to justify their governance competence.

Targeted normative messages have the benefit of clarity, and OAPEC serves as a prime example. In 37 of the 38 years for which we have data, this organization highlights economic welfare (25 years, 49 legitimation statements) or its functional

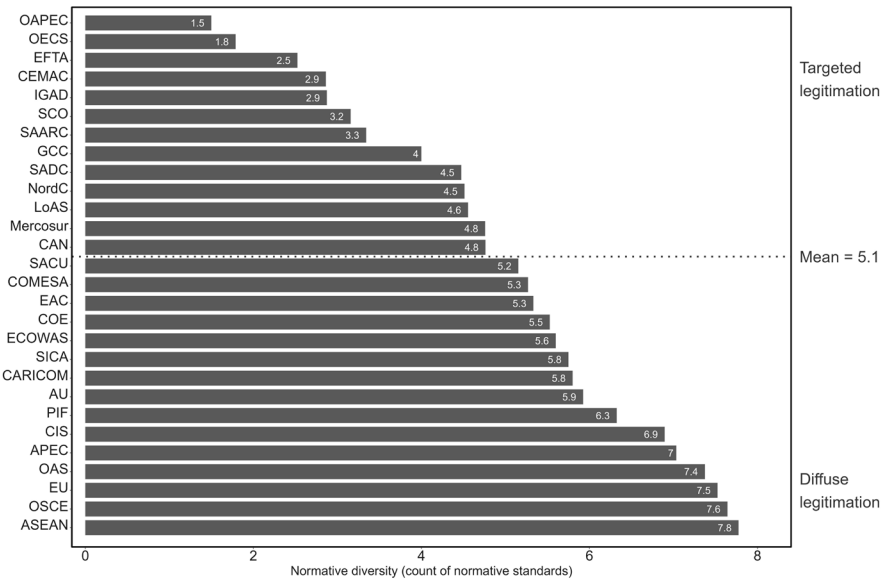
²⁶ Dingwerth et al., 'The rise of democratic legitimation'; Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, 'Political claims analysis: integrating protest event and political discourse approaches', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 4: 2, 1999, pp. 203–21.

²⁷ Martin Binder and Monika Heupel, 'The politics of legitimation in international organizations', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6: 3, 2021, pp. 1–18; Lisa M. Dellmuth, Jan Aart Scholte and Jonas Tallberg, 'Institutional sources of legitimacy for international organisations: beyond procedure versus performance', *Review of International Studies* 45: 4, 2019, pp. 1–20; Dingwerth et al., *International organizations under pressure*; Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zürn, 'The legitimacy and legitimation of international organizations: introduction and framework', *Review of International Organizations* 14: 4, 2019, pp. 581–606.

²⁸ Kilian Spandler and Fredrik Söderbaum, 'Populist (de)legitimation of regional organizations: from procedural and functional toward representational frames', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 1023–41; Daniel F. Wajner, 'The populist way out: why contemporary populist leaders seek transnational legitimation', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24: 3, 2022, pp. 416–36.

²⁹ We treat structural necessity as a separate standard because IOs frequently claim that they are indispensable (positive evaluation) without explaining why this is the case (see example in table 2).

Figure 1: Normative diversity in discursive legitimation across 28 regional IOs, 1980–2019



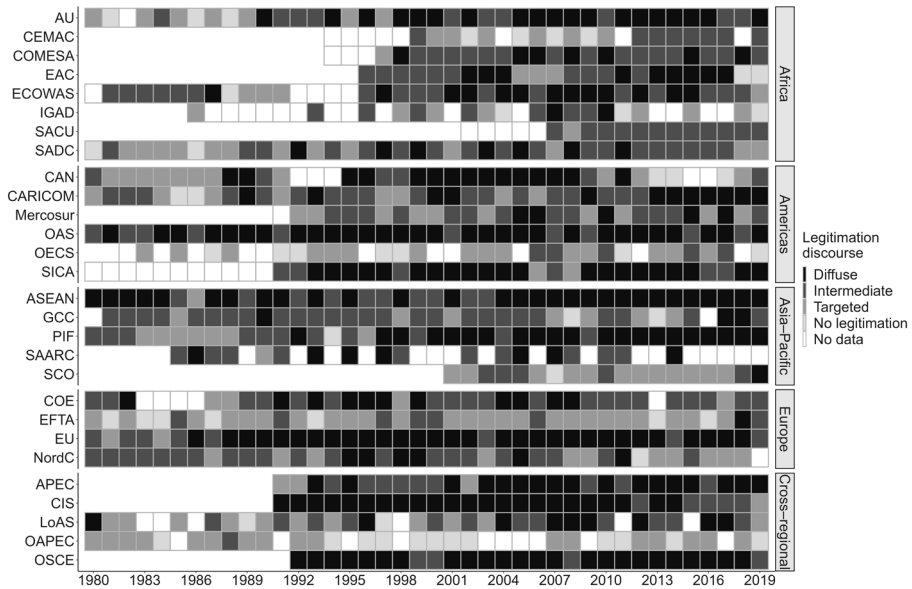
Notes: Full names of IOs mentioned in the figure (in the order in which they appear): Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), European Free Trade Association (EFTA), Central African Economic and Monetary Union (CEMAC), Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Southern African Development Community (SADC), Nordic Council (NordC), League of Arab States (LoAS), Common Market of the South (Mercosur), Andean Pact/Andean Community (CAN), Southern African Customs Union (SACU), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), East African Community (EAC), Council of Europe (COE), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Central American Integration System (SICA), Caribbean Community (CARICOM), Organization of African Unity/African Union (AU), Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Organization of American States (OAS), European Union (EU), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

capabilities (12 years, 19 legitimation statements). In a rare paragraph that emphasizes the organization’s performance in both domains, it argues, for instance, that The General Secretariat worked hard to enhance the organization. Premises for the Judicial Tribunal were leased, a registrar was appointed, and the Tribunal’s codified rules of procedure were approved. To further cooperation and coordination between members, the General Secretariat suggested practical ways of increasing coordination, particularly in training, exchanging information, harmonizing petroleum legislation, and combating oil industry pollution.³⁰

All other standards appear in 25 statements spread across 20 years. Seven other organizations in the sample use less than one-third of the standards on our list.

³⁰ Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries, *Secretary General’s tenth annual report AH 1403/AD 198* (Safat, 1983), p. 5.

Figure 2: Normative diversity in discursive legitimation across 28 regional IOs and time, 1980–2019



Notes: Full names of IOs mentioned in the figure (in the order in which they appear): Africa: Organization of African Unity/African Union (AU), Central African Economic and Monetary Union (CEMAC), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), East African Community (EAC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Southern African Customs Union (SACU), Southern African Development Community (SADC); Americas: Andean Pact/Andean Community (CAN), Caribbean Community (CARICOM), Common Market of the South (Mercosur), Organization of American States (OAS), Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), Central American Integration System (SICA); Asia-Pacific: Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); Europe: Council of Europe (COE), European Free Trade Association (EFTA), European Union (EU), Nordic Council (NordC); Cross-regional: Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), League of Arab States (LoAS), Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

A diffuse legitimation discourse entails use of more than six normative standards, an intermediate discourse of four to six standards, and a targeted discourse of one to three standards. No legitimation means that we did not identify a single legitimation statement.

ASEAN, by contrast, uses diverse standards. While the organization refers to economic welfare in all 40 years in the sample (291 statements), three more standards appear with similar frequency (security: 206 statements in 39 years; political community: 180 statements in 38 years; and functional capability: 112 statements in 37 years), and four additional standards are present in more than half of the years (international influence: 91 statements in 34 years; external recognition: 63 statements in 27 years; democracy: 61 statements in 23 years; and economic community: 53 statements in 20 years). As a result, ASEAN’s normative message is diffuse and emphasizes standards to which diverse audiences can potentially relate. The following statement illustrates this approach:

The Heads of Government agreed that ASEAN has grown into a viable and dynamic organization fostering the spirit of regional cooperation and solidarity and strengthening national and regional resilience. They noted that ASEAN has also developed a distinct identity and has become an effective vehicle for joint approaches to regional and international issues. They also noted that regular consultations have forged closer relations among the member states and thus promoted peace, stability and prosperity in the region.³¹

Figure 2 displays normative diversity across IOs and over time. Based on the number of normative standards used per year, we categorize IO-years as representing diffuse (more than six standards), intermediate (four to six standards) and targeted legitimation (one to three standards). The figure indicates, first, that there is limited change over time. Following a period of diversification during the 1980s and early 1990s, from an average of more than three to more than five standards, average normative diversity has remained stable. Second, IOs' legitimation discourse displays significant volatility. No IO in the sample belongs to only one of the three groups over the entire period. The targeted legitimation of OAPEC and the European Free Trade Association comes closest to a stable pattern, except for a few upward spikes. Diffuse legitimizers such as ASEAN, the OSCE and the EU occasionally use more targeted legitimation. While this confirms the findings described in figure 1, it also shows few IOs with clear temporal trajectories. The African Union and PIF are exceptions to this overarching pattern of temporal fluctuation, as both organizations shifted permanently from targeted to diffuse legitimation during the early 1990s.

Explaining normative diversity

How can we explain these empirical patterns? In line with Lenz and Söderbaum, we conceive of discursive legitimation as a strategic activity undertaken by IO agents, which we conceptualize, in line with extant work, as encompassing bureaucracies and member states.³² As IO representatives, legitimation agents have incentives to foster audiences' belief in an organization's legitimacy because legitimacy facilitates an IO's smooth operation. Where legitimacy is high, governance tends to be cheaper, compliance higher, and financial and political support more forthcoming.³³ Thus, strategic agents consider the costs and benefits of varying discursive legitimation and their effects on audiences as the ultimate 'dispensers of legitimacy'.³⁴

³¹ Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 'Joint communique: the third ASEAN heads of government meeting, Manila, 14–15 December 1987' (Manila, 1987), p. 1.

³² Lenz and Söderbaum, 'Legitimation strategies in international organizations'; Tallberg and Zürn, 'The legitimacy and legitimation of international organizations'; Dominik Zaum, 'International organizations, legitimacy, and legitimation', in Dominik Zaum, ed., *Legitimizing international organizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 3–25. Legitimation may also be non-strategic, even unintentional, but we believe that a strategic understanding offers distinct advantages in terms of theorizing and rigorous empirical work, as we seek to demonstrate.

³³ Jennifer Gronau and Henning Schmidtke, 'The quest for legitimacy in world politics: international institutions' legitimation strategies', *Review of International Studies* 42: 3, 2016, pp. 535–57; Tallberg and Zürn, 'The legitimacy and legitimation of international organizations'.

³⁴ Jens Steffek, 'The legitimation of international governance: a discourse approach', *European Journal of Inter-*

Our theoretical argument starts from the premise that agents seek to balance two potentially opposing goals in constructing legitimacy claims. On the one hand, they seek clear normative messages best served by targeted legitimacy claims. Clarity, in turn, is likely to strengthen the claims' impact because it is easier for audiences to evaluate clear messages.³⁵ Experimental research demonstrates that elite discourse may shape individual legitimacy beliefs. When citizens are given party cues to consider, for instance, the democratic quality of an IO as a source of legitimacy, such targeted messages shape their legitimacy beliefs.³⁶ Messages that emphasize a variety of norms are less likely to have this effect because the danger of espousing conflicting norms arises or the effects of different norms may cancel each other out.

On the other hand, agents seek to construct claims that resonate with core audiences and other relevant actors. By implication, the cost of targeted legitimacy claims rises with the growing heterogeneity of the relevant actors. Conversely, the benefits of diffuse legitimation increase because diverse claims are more likely to resonate with diverse actors. In line with the three analytical perspectives outlined by Lenz and Söderbaum, we consider three sets of relevant actors: audiences, agents and peer organizations.³⁷ We discuss each in turn and derive testable hypotheses.

Normative diversity through audience beliefs

The common wisdom in the literature conceives of discursive legitimation as reflecting the legitimacy beliefs of relevant audiences, including political elites, civil society and ordinary citizens.³⁸ This perspective starts from the premise that legitimation is likely to be successful when legitimation agents respond instrumentally to audience demands, that is, when they construct legitimacy claims on the basis of the norms that audiences use to assess an IO's legitimacy. Thus, legitimation agents seek to determine which audiences' beliefs are most relevant to the organization's functioning and to what norms these audiences subscribe.³⁹ When relevant audiences are normatively homogeneous, legitimation agents construct targeted legitimation that conveys a clear message. Targeted claims become costly when audiences are more heterogeneous because they fail to resonate with a more

national Relations 9: 2, 2003, pp. 249–75 at p. 257; see also Christian Reus-Smit, 'International crises of legitimacy', *International Politics* 44: 2–3, 2007, pp. 157–74.

³⁵ Graesser et al., 'Discourse comprehension'.

³⁶ Brilé Anderson, Thomas Bernauer and Aya Kachi, 'Does international pooling of authority affect the perceived legitimacy of global governance?', *Review of International Organizations* 14: 1, 2019, pp. 661–83; Lisa M. Dellmuth and Jonas Tallberg, 'Elite communication and the popular legitimacy of international organizations', *British Journal of Political Science* 51: 3, 2021, pp. 1292–1313; Megumi Naoi, 'Survey experiments in international political economy: what we (don't) know about the backlash against globalization', *Annual Review of Political Science* 23: 1, 2020, pp. 333–56.

³⁷ Lenz and Söderbaum, 'Legitimation strategies in international organizations'.

³⁸ Steven Bernstein, 'Legitimacy in intergovernmental and non-state global governance', *Review of International Political Economy* 18: 1, 2011, pp. 17–51; Gronau and Schmidtke, 'The quest for legitimacy in world politics'; Rauh and Zürn, 'Authority, politicization, and alternative justifications'; Tallberg and Zürn, 'The legitimacy and legitimation of international organizations'.

³⁹ Magdalena Bexell, Kristina Jönsson and Nora Stappert, 'Whose legitimacy beliefs count? Targeted audiences in global governance legitimation processes', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 24: 2, 2021, pp. 483–508.

diverse range of normative demands.⁴⁰ In such circumstances we would expect legitimation agents to use a broader set of normative standards.

The public politicization of an IO may spark a similar diversification. Politicization means that international cooperation becomes the subject of public debate because audiences mobilize competing political preferences and normative convictions in the public realm.⁴¹ Discussion of the desirability of international cooperation in the public sphere mobilizes ‘a more diverse set of societal stakeholders, [which in turn] widen[s] the political community that has to grant legitimacy’.⁴² Such politicization tends to enlarge the set of normative standards that audiences deem relevant in assessing the legitimacy of an IO. In such situations, constructing targeted legitimacy claims is costly since it renders IOs vulnerable to criticism by those audiences whose legitimacy beliefs rest on norms other than those contained in targeted claims. Therefore, more diverse normative claims promise to shield an IO from criticism and dampen politicization.⁴³ These arguments lead to two testable hypotheses:

- H1a: IOs targeting heterogeneous audiences use a more diverse legitimation discourse.
- H1b: IOs experiencing politicization use a more diverse legitimation discourse.

Normative diversity through agents’ beliefs

The agent-based perspective focuses on agents’ beliefs as the primary origin of discursive legitimation. From this perspective, agents do not primarily react to audiences but construct legitimacy claims based on their own normative convictions, with an instrumental view to convincing audiences of their relevance and validity.⁴⁴ In this vein, we may think of legitimation agents as strategic norm entrepreneurs, or ‘transnational moral entrepreneurs’,⁴⁵ who promote norms ‘because they believe in the ideals and values embodied in the norms’.⁴⁶ Legitimation agents

⁴⁰ Terrence Chapman, ‘Audience beliefs and international organization legitimacy’, *International Organization* 63: 4, 2009, pp. 733–64.

⁴¹ Pieter de Wilde, Anna Leupold and Henning Schmidtke, ‘Introduction: the differentiated politicisation of European governance’, *West European Politics*, 39: 1, 2016, pp. 3–22; Catherine E. de Vries, Sara B. Hobolt and Stefanie Walter, ‘Politicizing international cooperation: the mass public, political entrepreneurs, and political opportunity structures’, *International Organization* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 306–32.

⁴² Rauh and Zürn, ‘Authority, politicization, and alternative justifications’, p. 587.

⁴³ Kyung Joon Han, ‘Beclouding party position as an electoral strategy: voter polarization, issue priority and position blurring’, *British Journal of Political Science* 50: 2, 2020, pp. 653–75; Markus Hinterleitner, ‘Policy failures, blame games and changes to policy practice’, *Journal of Public Policy* 38: 2, 2018, pp. 221–42; David Miller and Andrew Reeves, ‘Pass the buck or the buck stops here? The public costs of claiming and deflecting blame in managing crises’, *Journal of Public Policy* 42: 1, 2022, pp. 63–91.

⁴⁴ Lisa M. Dellmuth, Jan Aart Scholte, Jonas Tallberg and Soetkin Verhaegen, ‘The elite–citizen gap in international organization legitimacy’, *American Political Science Review* 116: 1, 2022, pp. 283–300.

⁴⁵ Ethan Nadelmann, ‘Global prohibition regimes: The evolution of norms in international society’, *International Organization* 44: 4, 1990, pp. 479–526.

⁴⁶ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, ‘International norm dynamics and political change’, *International Organization* 52: 4, 1998, pp. 887–917 at p. 898. The activities and the success of norm entrepreneurs has been widely documented on political issues ranging from women’s suffrage to human rights and from the landmine ban to anti-whaling norms. See Charlotte Epstein, *The power of words in international relations: birth of an anti-whaling discourse* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Richard Price, ‘Reversing the gun sights: transnational civil society targets land mines’, *International Organization* 52: 3, 1998, pp. 613–44; Lisbeth Zimmermann, ‘Same

are a relevant source of an IO's discursive legitimation because their beliefs shape how they perceive audiences' normative demands. Research on cognitive biases suggests, for example, that new information is more likely to be perceived and processed when it confirms existing beliefs, and more likely to be discarded when it requires changing existing beliefs—a phenomenon referred to as confirmation bias.⁴⁷ Similarly, the anchoring heuristic indicates that actors give more weight to prior beliefs than to new information, suggesting that agents' beliefs condition the perception of audience demands.⁴⁸

It follows that the heterogeneity of agents shapes discursive legitimation independently of an organization's audiences. As the agents themselves become more diverse, the formulation of targeted legitimacy claims becomes costly for the IO because its discursive legitimation fails to accommodate all relevant agents' normative beliefs. This situation is likely to lead to dissatisfaction among those agents whose beliefs are not reflected in legitimation strategies and may spark conflict. IOs characterized by heterogeneous agents should display more normative diversity in discursive legitimation to avoid these negative consequences. The resulting legitimation should be more targeted in those cases where IO agents share normative commitments. Thus, we hypothesize:

- H2: IOs characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity among legitimation agents use a more diverse legitimation discourse.

Normative diversity through peers

The third perspective locates the origin of discursive legitimation in an IO's organizational environment. It starts from the premise that IOs are not atomistic entities whose agents construct legitimacy claims in isolation from one another. Instead, agents observe the legitimation discourse of peer organizations and draw on this information to build their own legitimacy claims.⁴⁹ At the heart of this environment-based perspective is the notion of an organizational field, understood as 'those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life'.⁵⁰ Within such fields, organizations engage in regular interaction and develop an awareness of each other's structures and activities. Over

same or different? Norm diffusion between resistance, compliance, and localization in post-conflict states', *International Studies Perspectives* 17: 1, 2016, pp. 98–115.

⁴⁷ Raymond S. Nickerson, 'Confirmation bias: a ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises', *Review of General Psychology* 2: 2, 1998, pp. 175–220.

⁴⁸ Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahnemann, 'Judgment under uncertainty: heuristics and biases', *Science* 185: 4157, 1974, pp. 1124–31; Tobias Lenz and Lora Anne Viola, 'Legitimacy and institutional change in international organisations: a cognitive approach', *Review of International Studies* 43: 5, 2017, pp. 939–61 at pp. 951–2.

⁴⁹ Tobias Lenz, *Interorganizational diffusion in international relations: regional institutions and the role of the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Beth Simmons, Frank Dobbin and Geoffrey Garrett, 'Introduction: the international diffusion of liberalism', *International Organization* 60: 4, 2006, pp. 781–810; Thomas Sommerer and Jonas Tallberg, 'Diffusion across international organizations: connectivity and convergence', *International Organization* 73: 2, 2019, pp. 399–433. We treat peer organizations as a separate category rather than as part of the audience-based perspective because their influence operates not via *actively* voiced normative demands but via the offering of discursive templates that provide opportunities for learning and emulation.

⁵⁰ Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell, 'The iron cage revisited: institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields', *American Sociological Review* 48: 2, 1983, pp. 147–60 at p. 148.

time, the consolidation of organizational fields exerts pressure on organizations to become more similar to one another because certain discourses are widely seen as legitimate.⁵¹ Organizational fields thus constitute a relevant peer group for IOs and convey to constituent units what appropriate legitimation looks like. For example, a discourse of non-state participation in IOs has induced the widespread establishment of novel participatory institutional forms.⁵²

We theorize that the pressures that peer organizations exert are a function of the overlap between these organizations—an idea that is often referred to as regime complexity.⁵³ Such overlap exists when IOs share members and policy competencies and are thus likely to interact. This interaction results in familiarity among organizations and facilitates processes of learning and emulation.⁵⁴ As overlap increases, IO agents are more likely to perceive and follow the signals that peer organizations emit. For example, as more IOs use environmental protection as a normative standard in discursive legitimation, overlapping IOs are likely to do so as well. Organizational overlap, we posit, shapes the normative diversity of legitimation. As overlap grows, an IO encounters a broader range of normative standards beyond those available within the IO itself. As a result of the legitimacy dynamics in organizational fields and the aforementioned psychological processes, the cost of deviation in an IO's discursive legitimation from that of peer organizations is higher when overlap is extensive. A final hypothesis follows from this discussion:

- H₃: IOs that overlap with peer organizations in terms of membership or policy use a more diverse legitimation discourse.

The origins of normative diversity: a statistical analysis

Because the impact of audiences, agents and peers on normative diversity intersect, we test the plausibility of our hypotheses in a multivariate setting. This section describes how we measure the influence of the three actor groups before presenting our main results.

Operationalization of variables

Our dependent variable—*normative diversity*—is the count of the normative standards legitimation agents use each year. Since this count is sensitive to individual coder decisions, political events, and the process of drafting the documents anal-

⁵¹ DiMaggio and Powell, 'The iron cage revisited'; John Meyer and Brian Rowan, 'Institutionalized organizations: formal structure as myth and ceremony', *American Journal of Sociology* 83: 2, 1977, pp. 340–63.

⁵² Tobias Lenz, Alexandr Burilkov and Lora Anne Viola, 'Legitimacy and the cognitive sources of international institutional change: the case of regional parliamentarization', *International Studies Quarterly* 63: 4, 2019, pp. 1094–1107; Sommerer and Tallberg, 'Diffusion across international organizations'.

⁵³ Alter and Raustiala, 'The rise of international regime complexity'; Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Oliver Westerwinter, 'The global governance complexity cube: varieties of institutional complexity in global governance', *Review of International Organizations* 17: 1, 2022, pp. 233–62.

⁵⁴ Theoretically, overlap may also induce competition for scarce resources, suggesting an extension of the list of diffusion mechanisms. However, we find it implausible to argue that this increases normative diversity, because competition is more likely to lead IOs towards more differentiated—and thus targeted—legitimation to signal their distinctiveness. We thank one reviewer for prompting us to clarify this point.

ysed, we use a three-year moving average in the analysis by averaging the annual values for any IO across a three-year period (i.e. including the prior and the following year).

We operationalize the explanatory factors highlighted in the theory section as follows. First, following the literature on IO audiences (H1a), we seek to capture the influence of internal and external audiences.⁵⁵ The first measure captures the heterogeneity of internal audiences. *Non-state consultative status* counts how many of five non-governmental actor groups (business, labour, parliamentarians, subnational, others) have formal access to an IO's decision-making processes, drawing on an updated version of the Measure of International Authority (MIA) dataset.⁵⁶ Given the large number of global South IOs in our sample, we expect international donors to constitute an essential external audience.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, systematic data on the external donors of IOs is not available. Hence, the second variable measures *donor heterogeneity* as differences in bilateral donors' political regime types, combining information on bilateral aid provided by AidData and data from the Varieties of Democracy (VDEM) dataset.⁵⁸ This measure is low when donors have similar political regimes, for example in a group of established democracies, and it is high when donors include democracies and autocracies. The third variable turns to publicly visible *protest* against IOs as the most effective component of public politicization (H1b). We generate this variable by counting the number of newspaper articles that report demonstrations against an IO in the Major World Newspapers corpus provided by LexisNexis, which includes more than 400 English-language newspapers from all world regions.⁵⁹

Second, we use two measures to capture the heterogeneity of IO agents' normative beliefs (H2). The first variable measures *institutional heterogeneity* among members as differences in member states' political regime type, using information from the VDEM dataset. This measure is higher when an IO's membership comprises states with different political regime types, e.g. democracies and autocracies. The second measure gauges cultural differences between member states based on their civilizational category, as contained in the MIA dataset. It is high when member states have distinct cultural backgrounds, such as western, Latin American, Hindu, Islamic or Buddhist, and it is low when member states come from more similar cultural backgrounds, which is the case, for example, when an IO encompasses Latin American states only.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Bexell et al., 'Whose legitimacy beliefs count?'; Zaum, 'International organizations, legitimacy, and legitimation'.

⁵⁶ Hooghe et al., *Measuring international authority*; and updated for 2011–2019 by Yoram Z. Haftel and Tobias Lenz, 'Measuring institutional overlap in global governance', *Review of International Organizations* 17: 1, 2022, pp. 323–47.

⁵⁷ Erin R. Graham, 'Money and multilateralism: how funding rules constitute IO governance', *International Theory* 7: 1, 2015, pp. 162–94.

⁵⁸ Michael J. Tierney, Daniel L. Nielson, Darren G. Hawkins, J. Timmons Roberts, Michael G. Findley, Ryan M. Powers, Bradley Parks, Sven E. Wilson and Robert L. Hicks, 'More dollars than sense: refining our knowledge of development finance using AidData', *World Development* 39: 11, 2011, pp. 1891–1906.

⁵⁹ See also Liesbet Hooghe, Tobias Lenz and Gary Marks, *A theory of international organization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Jonas Tallberg, Thomas Sommerer, Theresa Squatrito and Christer Jönsson, *The opening up of international organizations: transnational access in global governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁶⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Schuster,

Third, we use measures developed by Haftel and Lenz to gauge organizational overlap.⁶¹ Their dataset captures the average *policy* and *membership overlap* among the 76 most authoritative IOs globally by counting the number of common member states and policy competencies. IOs with many joint members and policy competencies have numerous mutual learning and exchange opportunities.

Finally, we include four control variables to account for our data structure. The first measure controls the availability of coded documents (*type of documents*). Ideally, our data would build on one annual report and one communiqué per IO-year. However, in some cases, we could only locate and code one of these two documents. As our measure of normative diversity draws on information from both documents, having only one of them potentially decreases normative diversity. The second measure—*legitimation intensity*—controls for the fact that more frequent legitimization statements are a necessary but not sufficient condition for normative diversity. This variable counts the number of all legitimization statements identified per IO-year and divides it by the total number of coded paragraphs. The third variable—*IO purpose*—controls for differences in IO mandates, because IOs that engage in the myriad problems that their members confront are more likely to use a broader set of normative standards.⁶² Fourth, we include *year* as a continuous variable to control for temporal trends.⁶³

Multivariate results

For the multivariate analysis, we use multilevel regression.⁶⁴ Figure 3 plots the average marginal effects of all explanatory factors with a 95 per cent confidence interval. Recall that we measure normative diversity, meaning that effects greater than 1 should be interpreted as predictors of normative diversification, whereas the opposite is true for effects below 0. In other words, the higher the effect size, the higher the normative diversity in an IO's discursive legitimization.

The analysis partially supports the common wisdom that IO legitimization originates from IO agents' search for audience support by catering to their normative demands. Although the signs of all three variables are in the expected direction, *donor heterogeneity* and *protest* have no measurable effect. Yet formal access to IO

1996); Douglas W. Rae, *Political consequences of electoral laws* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967); Bruce M. Russett, John R. Oneal and Michaelene Cox, 'Clash of civilizations, or realism and liberalism déjà vu? Some evidence', *Journal of Peace Research* 37: 5, 2000, pp. 583–608.

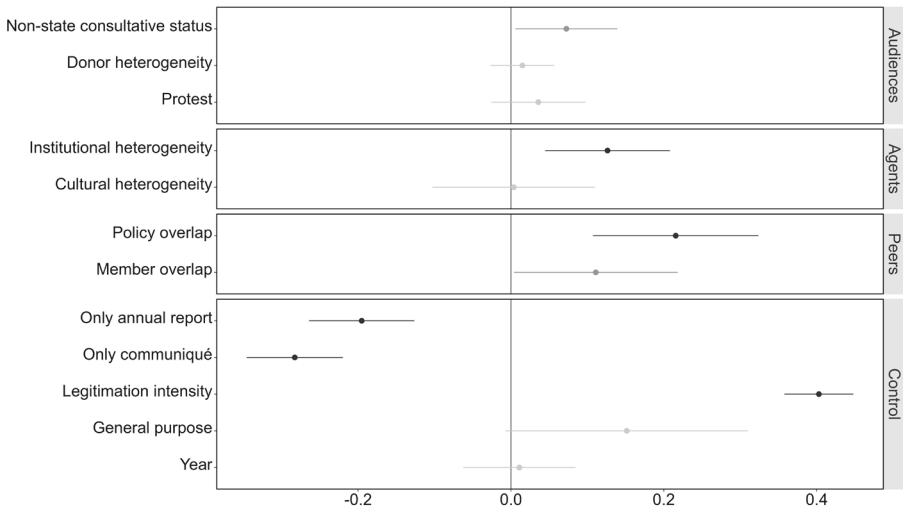
⁶¹ Haftel and Lenz, 'Measuring institutional overlap in global governance'.

⁶² Tobias Lenz, Jeanine Bezuijen, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, 'Patterns of international organization: general purpose vs. task specific', *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 49, 2015, pp. 131–56.

⁶³ We present detailed descriptions of all variables and descriptive statistics as well as alternative operationalizations and model specifications in the online appendix, available at [https://tobiaslenz.com/publications/agents-audiences-and-peers-why-international-organizations-diversify-their-discursive-legitimation/..](https://tobiaslenz.com/publications/agents-audiences-and-peers-why-international-organizations-diversify-their-discursive-legitimation/)

⁶⁴ Multilevel regression is used to estimate the relationship between a continuous dependent variable and a set of predictors where data for observations are organized at more than one level (i.e. nested data). Multilevel regression recognizes the existence of nested data structures (years grouped by IO) by allowing the intercept to vary across groups and thus enable more precise estimations. To avoid simultaneity bias, we lag all explanatory factors in the estimation by one year. To facilitate the interpretation of coefficients, we z-standardize all variables by subtracting the sample mean from the raw score and dividing the result by the standard deviation of the sample. The resulting values represent the distance between the raw scores and the sample mean in standard deviation units.

Figure 3: Correlates of normative diversity of discursive legitimation, average marginal effects for all variables included in Model 4, with 95% CI



Note: The dots in the plot indicate the average change in normative diversity if the respective explanatory factor increases by one standard deviation. If, for instance, institutional heterogeneity increases by one standard deviation (0.075), normative diversity increases by 12.2 per cent. The whiskers around the dot (i.e. the confidence intervals) show how certain this estimated effect is. The narrower the confidence interval, the more precise the estimates are. Light grey lines denote non-significant results. Medium grey is significant at the 5 per cent level and dark grey at the 1 per cent level, indicating that there is a 5 per cent and 1 per cent probability, respectively, that the result is due to chance.

decision-making for a greater number of non-governmental actors is associated with higher normative diversity. In line with Ba’s analysis of the influence of audience diversity on legitimation, this suggests that IO agents only expand normative diversity to accommodate audience demands if audiences have direct access to the IO, for instance, through non-state consultative bodies.⁶⁵ Hence, the opening up of IOs to non-governmental actors appears to increase IO agents’ responsiveness to normative demands and, thus, the normative diversity of discursive legitimation.⁶⁶ By contrast, IO agents appear less responsive to audiences without direct IO access. As the effect of *non-state consultative status* is comparably small, these findings for the audience-based perspective corroborate our suggestion that an exclusive focus on audience demands falls short of a convincing explanation of normative diversity in discursive legitimation.

We also find partial support for the agent-based perspective. While *institutional heterogeneity* has a positive effect, *cultural heterogeneity* does not. As shown in figure 3, the impact of IO agents’ origin in diverse political regimes is slightly stronger than the effect of non-state consultative status. Like Spandler and Söderbaum’s

⁶⁵ Alice Ba, ‘Diversification’s legitimation challenges: ASEAN and its Myanmar predicament’, *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 1063–85.

⁶⁶ Jonas Tallberg, Thomas Sommerer, Theresa Squatrito and Christer Jönsson, ‘Explaining the transnational design of international organizations’, *International Organization* 68: 4, 2014, pp. 741–74.

analysis of populist legitimation, the results underline the importance of IO agents' normative convictions for IO behaviour, demonstrating that these actors are not purely self-interested rent-seekers.⁶⁷ Yet the results also indicate that not all sources of normative heterogeneity among IO agents translate into more normative diversity of discursive legitimation. While agents' cultural imprint is not related to normative diversity, the political regime from which IO agents originate appears to constitute an effective driver of normative diversity. When IO agents from democratic and autocratic countries come together to construct their IO's legitimation strategy, they tend to solve their normative difference by diversifying the discourse.

Finally, the analysis strongly supports the argument that IO agents derive discursive legitimation from organizational peers. The data reveal that *policy* and *membership overlap* have a comparably strong and positive effect on the normative diversity of an IO's discursive legitimation. In line with Palestini's analysis of the impact of peers on legitimation, this shows that IO agents perceive other IOs with which they share member states or policy competencies as relevant peer organizations.⁶⁸ When IOs are exposed to other legitimation discourses through overlap, their legitimation discourse tends to be more diverse.⁶⁹

Conclusion and policy implications

This contribution shows that IOs claim legitimacy in diverse ways. When their legitimacy is challenged, as in the example of PIF in 2021 cited at the beginning of this article, their representatives sometimes react with a targeted legitimation discourse, and at other times with a diffuse discourse. Our analysis demonstrates that those IOs that provide decision-making access to heterogeneous audiences, have members with diverse normative backgrounds and overlap extensively with peer organizations tend to espouse a more diverse legitimation discourse. Conversely, IOs that restrict decision-making access to few non-state actors, have a more homogenous membership and overlap little with other IOs tend to target their legitimacy claims. These findings indicate that IOs' discursive legitimation is responsive to the growing complexity of international cooperation that emerges from the interaction of increasingly heterogeneous agents, audiences and organizational peers.

Further research on other types of global governance arrangements, including on informal, hybrid and global institutions, would help establish the generalizability of these findings. We expect the basic logic of how the heterogeneity of agents, audiences and peers induces greater normative diversity in discursive

⁶⁷ Spandler and Söderbaum, 'Populist (de)legitimation of regional organizations'; see also Sarah von Billerbeck, "Mirror, mirror on the wall: self-legitimation by international organizations", *International Studies Quarterly* 64: 1, 2019, pp. 207–19; Stephen C. Nelson, 'Playing favorites: how shared beliefs shape the IMF's lending decisions', *International Organization* 68: 2, 2014, pp. 297–328.

⁶⁸ Stefano Palestini, 'The politics of legitimation in combined sanction regimes: the case of Venezuela', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 1087–107.

⁶⁹ We present a set of robustness checks with alternative model specifications and operationalizations of normative diversity and of our explanatory factors in the online appendix (see fn. 17 for details).

legitimation to be similar in other types of international institutions that are equipped with a modicum of agency. However, we suspect that the even greater *numerical* heterogeneity of agents, audiences and peers in a global context will not necessarily translate into a concomitant further increase in normative diversity, since the number of *relevant* actors from among these groups may be similar. In particular, global IOs tend to be controlled by a few powerful member states, and these IOs' bureaucracies may be less representative of member states' normative diversity than those of regional IOs.⁷⁰

Our findings may raise policy-makers' awareness of how the pluralism of specific actor groups within and around an IO—agents, audiences and peer organizations—shapes the construction of an organization's legitimacy claims. Given the increasing diversity of agents and audiences, especially in large or growing regional IOs, and the overlap among them, few organizations can afford to retain a targeted legitimation discourse today—despite the benefits such a discourse provides in terms of the clarity of the normative message. Instead, policy-makers wish to ensure that their legitimation efforts resonate with important actors and constituencies.

It follows that one key challenge for policy-makers lies in reconciling the legitimation pressures from these three actor groups without generating apparent contradictions. First, audience diversification may lead to the charge of hypocrisy. For example, some audiences may demand the 'liberal' extension of an IO, such as improving its democratic or human rights credentials, whereas others may want to bolster the communitarian dimension by improving national sovereignty or political community. Yet meeting both demands threatens to reveal contradictions between liberal and communitarian norms that are difficult to reconcile. Second, the diversity of normative beliefs among policy-makers themselves may give rise to a criticism of non-authenticity. Attempts at reconciling such competing beliefs may be criticized by audiences as foul compromises that water down the normative essence of an IO. The case of the EU, and in particular the increasing internal conflict over how to deal with illiberal developments in Poland and Hungary, attests to the difficulty of successful legitimation when there is serious disagreement among policy-makers about the norms they wish to see reflected in an organization.⁷¹ Third, friction may emerge when the normative signals emanating from peer IOs are contradictory. If peer organizations use both targeted and diffuse legitimation discourses, policy-makers must decide which signals to follow. Finally, friction may arise from contradictions not only within each actor category but also between them. While IO agents may struggle over whether to extend the legitimation of an IO beyond functional problem-solving to include liberal ideas, important audiences may demand a more substantial reliance on communitarian values.

⁷⁰ On this latter point, see Nelson, 'Playing favorites'.

⁷¹ Spandler and Söderbaum, 'Populist (de)legitimation of regional organizations'.