The legitimacy of the United Nations: Is the liberal world order threatened?

Dr Lisa Dellmuth
Associate Professor of International Relations
Stockholm University
I. Decline in UN legitimacy?

II. What can we do?

III. Conclusions for theory and practice
I. Decline in UN legitimacy?
What is legitimacy?

**Normative legitimacy:**
- An institution’s right to rule based on moral standards

**Sociological legitimacy:**
- The degree to which an institution is trusted to use its power appropriately among citizens, state and non-state actors
Citizen average trust in the UN, 1994-2014 – no significant general decline

Citizen trust in the UN across countries, 1994-2014 – fluctuations over time rather than steady decline

Source: Own calculations based on World Values Survey data
Citizen trust in global institutions, 2015 - UN most and IMF least trust in Germany

Source: Dellmuth and Tallberg (2018)

Elite trust in the UN, 2017-2019 - moderate trust

Scholte, Tallberg, and Verhaegen (2019)
Elite attitudes toward global governance: A report of summary findings from the Leggov Elite Survey, at
www.statsvet.su.se/leggov
Elite preferences for globalization, 2017-2019 - mostly in Germany

www.statsvet.su.se/leggov
Elite preferences for globalization, 2017-2019 - mostly in trade, environment, and human rights

Scholte, Tallberg, and Verhaegen (2019)
Elite attitudes toward global governance: A report of summary findings from the Leggov Elite Survey, at www.statsvet.su.se/leggov
II. What can we do?
No decline of UN legitimacy on average, but...

- Low levels or decline in UN legitimacy in the eyes of citizens in some countries (Argentina, South Africa, US,...)
- Low elite support for global governance in the context of some issue areas (health, development, education,...)
Why do we care?

- Legitimacy is a standard for good governance beyond benefits for specific actors
- It is a joint standard that is *shared* and not based on a single individual’s or a state’s values
- It is a standard that promotes viable and effective international organizations
Threats: anti-global populism

- Donald Trump: “NAFTA is the worst trade deal ever made.” / “The EU is possibly as bad as China on trade.”
- Rodrigo Duterte: “If the UN says a bad thing about me I can say ten things about you. The UN is worthless.”
- Yanis Varoufakis: “What the EU does to Greece has a name: terrorism.”
- Marine Le Pen: “Globalization is a barbarity.”
Populist critique reduces trust in international organizations

How do people form opinions about the UN?

Citizens trust the UN more:

- The more they trust national governments
- The more cosmopolitan they are
- The more benefits they think the UN generates for their country
- The more they trust the institutional qualities of the UN to be fair, democratic, and technocratic
What can we do? Improve institutional qualities relevant for citizens’ legitimacy beliefs towards the UN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democratic</th>
<th>Technocratic</th>
<th>Fair</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedure</strong></td>
<td>participation</td>
<td>efficiency</td>
<td>impartiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>accountability</td>
<td>expertise</td>
<td>access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Performance</strong></td>
<td>democracy promotion</td>
<td>problem-solving</td>
<td>human dignity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in wider society</td>
<td>collective gains</td>
<td>distributive justice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
III. Conclusions for theory and practice
Conclusions for theory and practice of UN legitimacy

1. No general decline of UN legitimacy between 1994-2014

2. Elites have moderate trust in the UN

3. Uphill battle for positive communication about the UN, and larger effects on citizen trust of critique of the UN

4. Reforms improving UN qualities will increase UN legitimacy
Acknowledgements

- Jonas Tallberg (*Stockholm University*)
- Jan A. Scholte (*University of Gothenburg*)
- Soetkin Verhaegen (*Stockholm University*)
More research at:

- Legitimacy in Global Governance Program (www.statsvet.su.se/leggov)
- Glocalizing Climate Governance Program (www.ekohist.su.se/glocalclim)