



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?

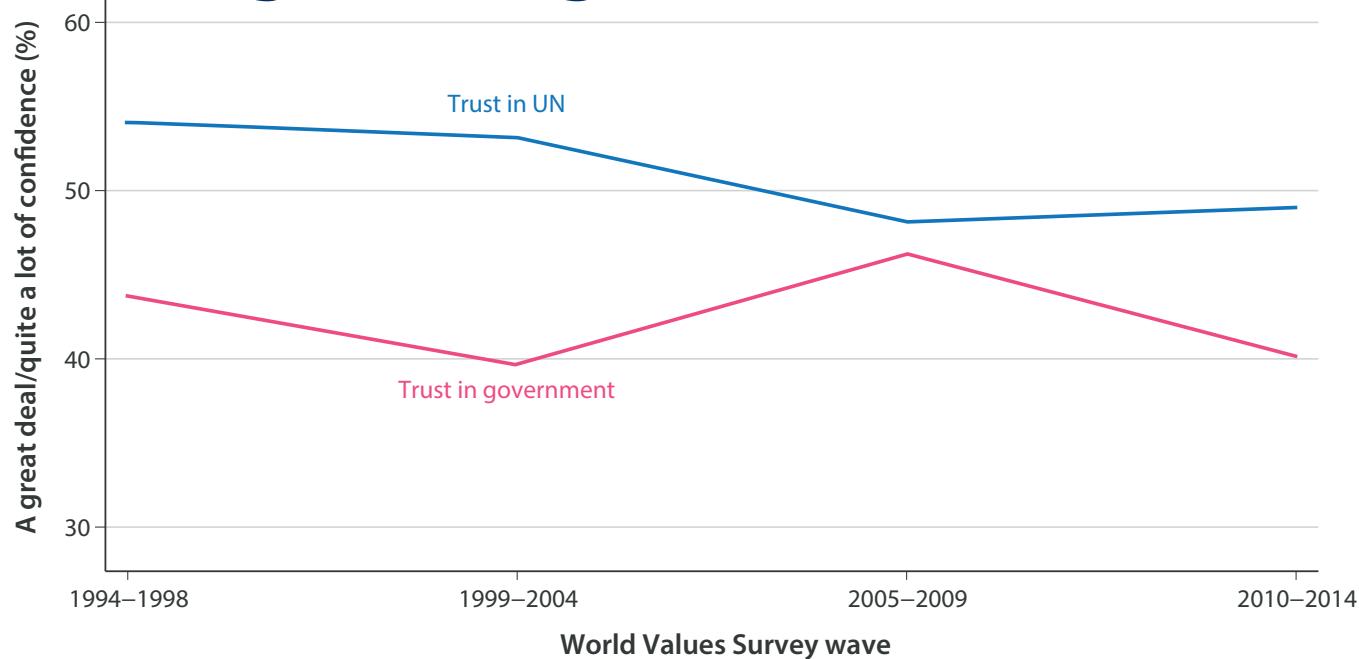
Normative legitimacy:

- An institution's right to rule based on moral standards

Sociological legitimacy:

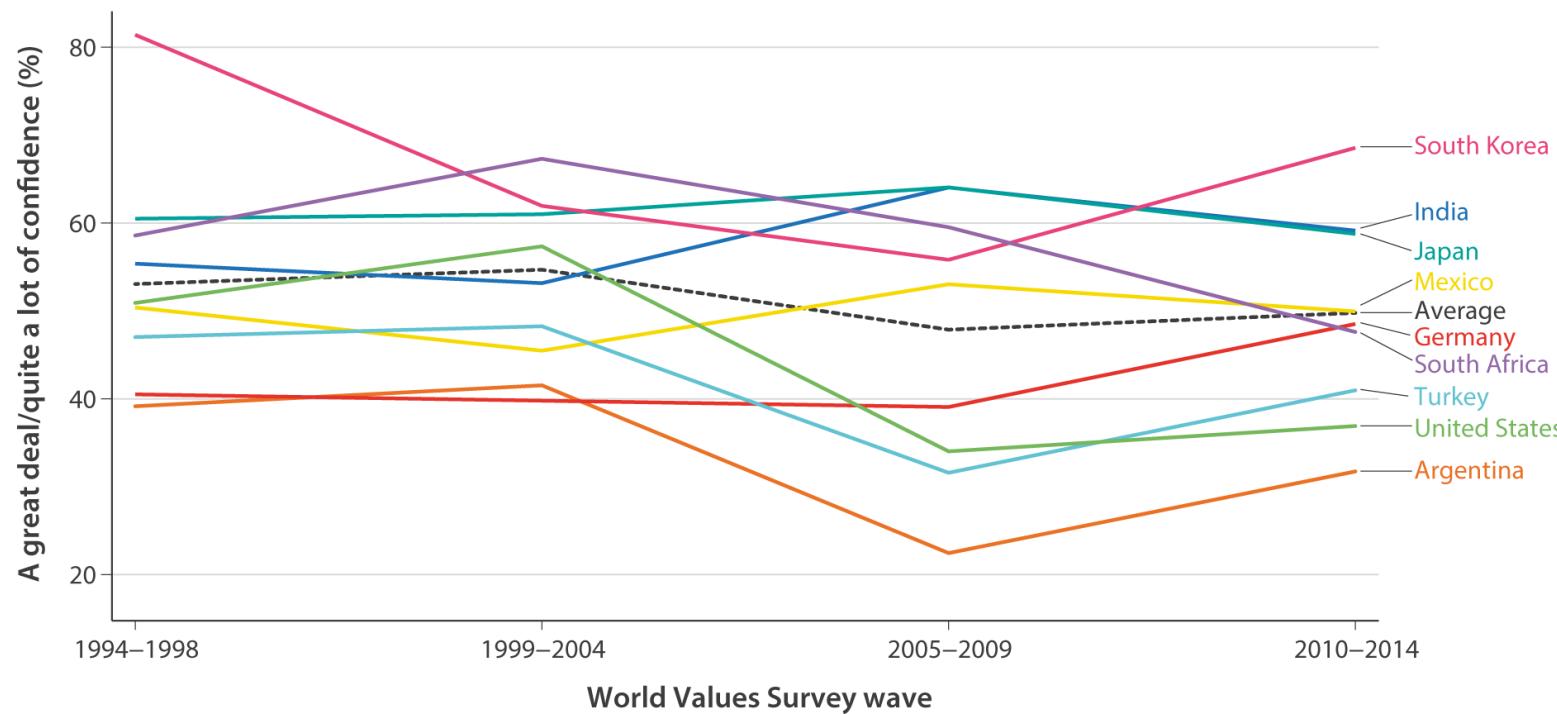
- The degree to which an institution is trusted to use its power appropriately among citizens, state and non-state actors

Citizen average trust in the UN, 1994-2014 – no significant general decline



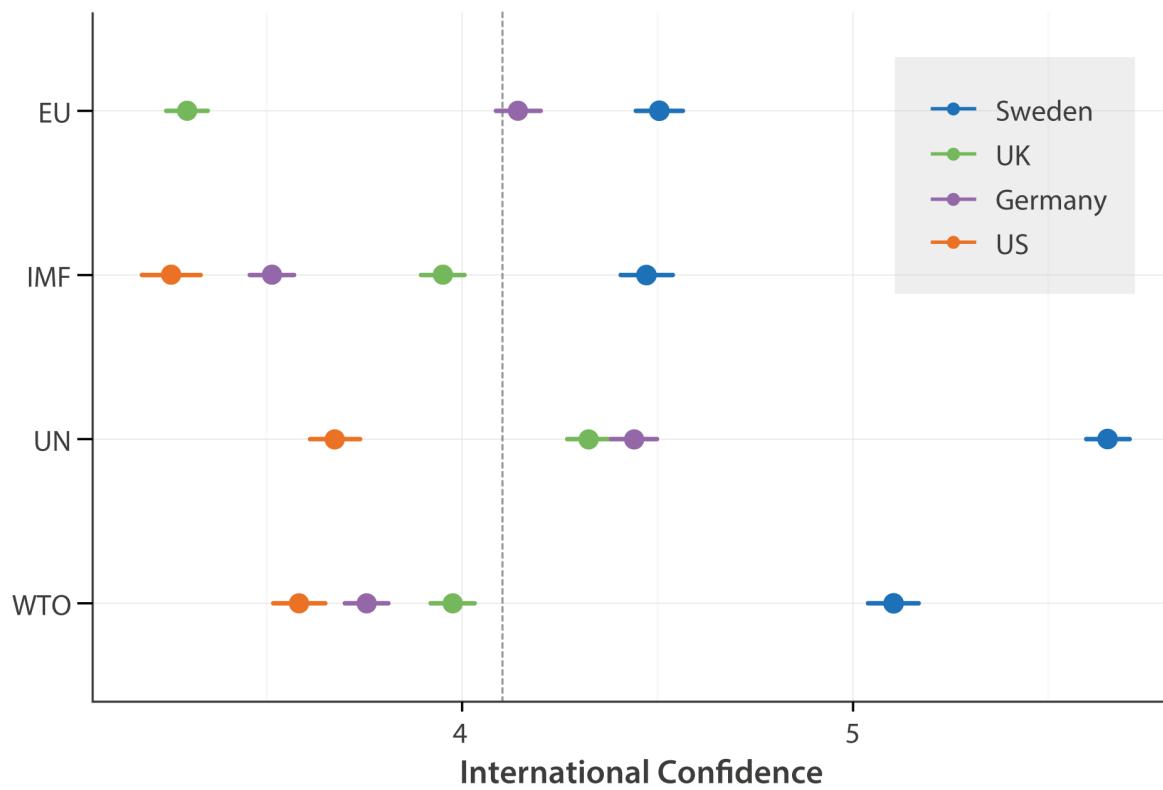
Source: Dellmuth and Tallberg 2019, p. 242, in Bäck, Maria & Kestilä-Kekkonen, Elina (toim.). Poliittinen ja sosiaalinen luottamus : polut, trendit ja kuilut. Helsinki, Valtiovarainministeriö.

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



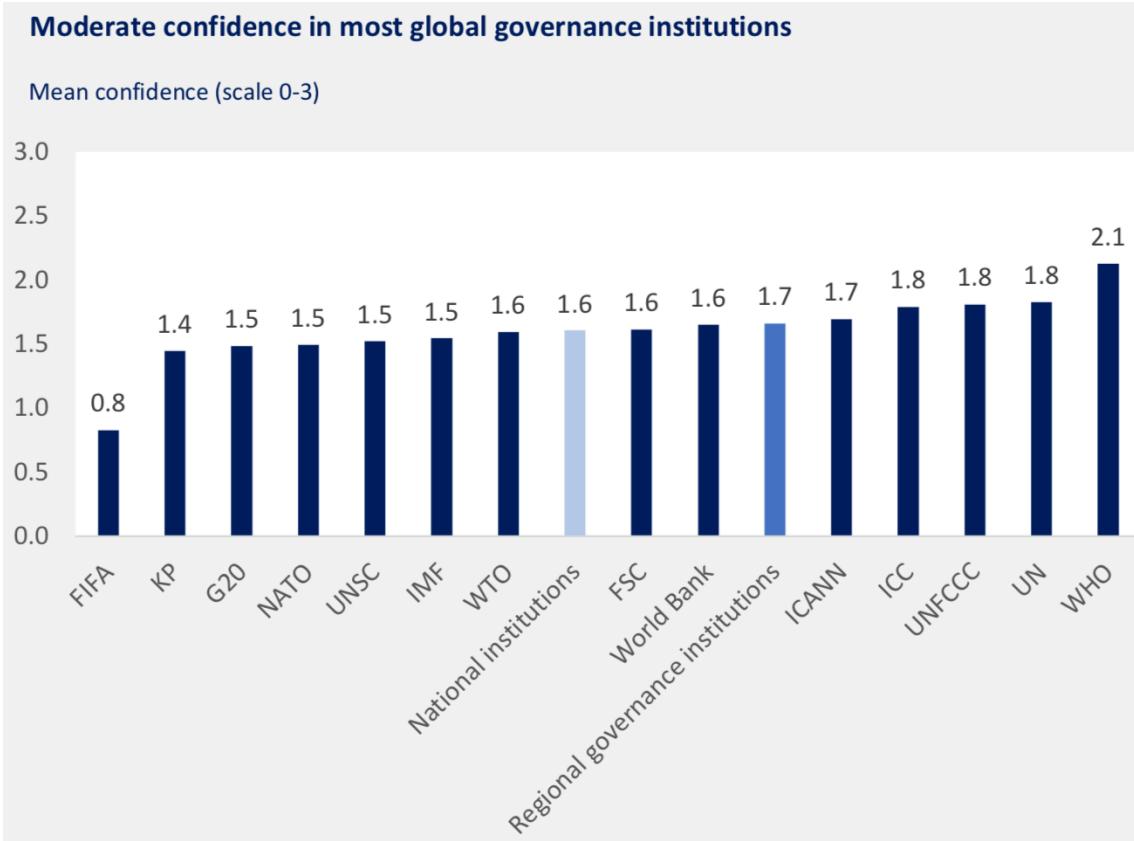
Source: Own calculations based on World Values Survey data

Citizen trust in global institutions, 2015 - UN most and IMF least trust in Germany



Source: Dellmuth and Tallberg (2018)
Why national and international legitimacy beliefs are linked: Social trust as an antecedent factor, Rev Int Org, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-018-9339-y>.

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



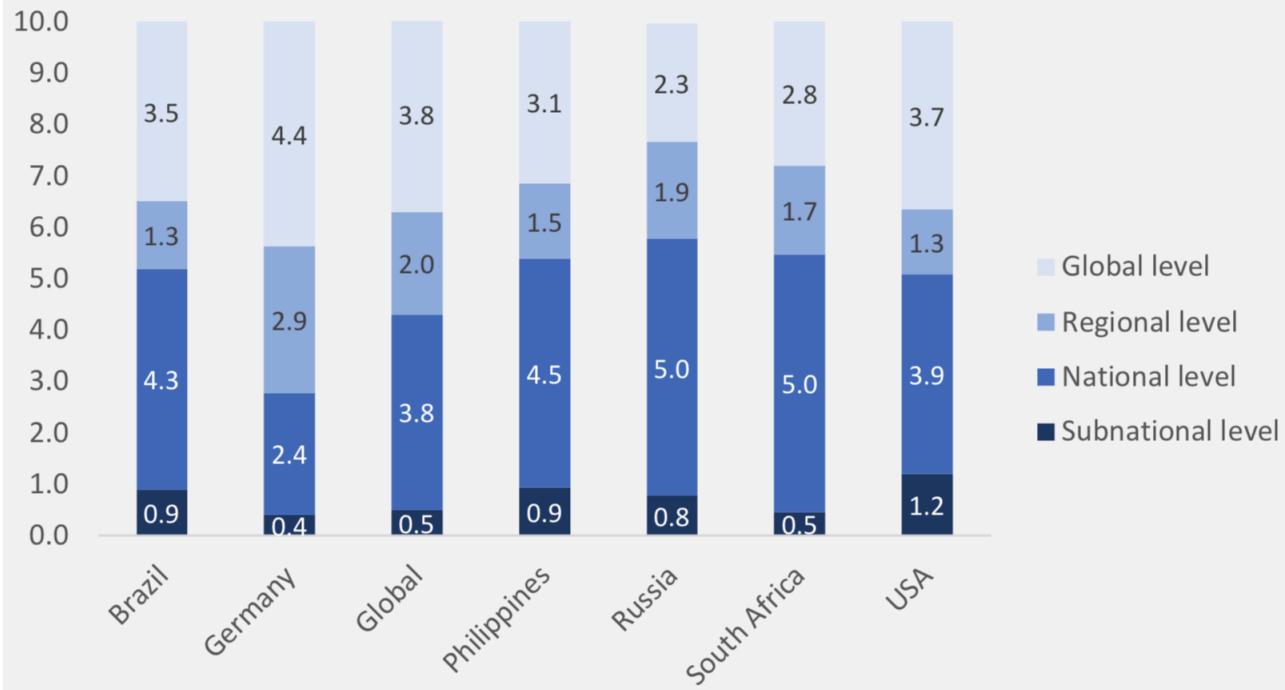
Scholte, Tallberg, and Verhaegen (2019)
Elite attitudes toward global governance: A report of summary findings from the Leggov Elite Survey, at www.statsvet.su.se/leggov

Elite preferences for globalization, 2017-2019

- mostly in Germany

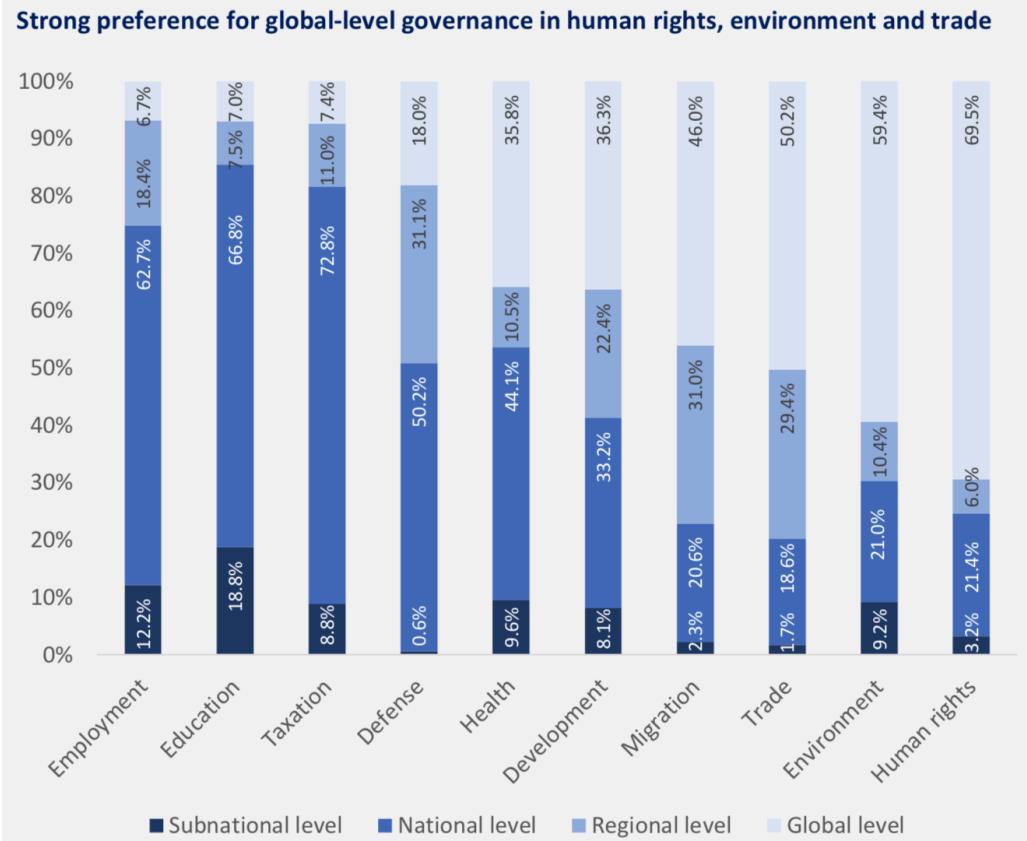
Strong variation between countries in preference for global-level governance

Average number of policy areas preferred to be handled at each level of decision-making



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 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,...)

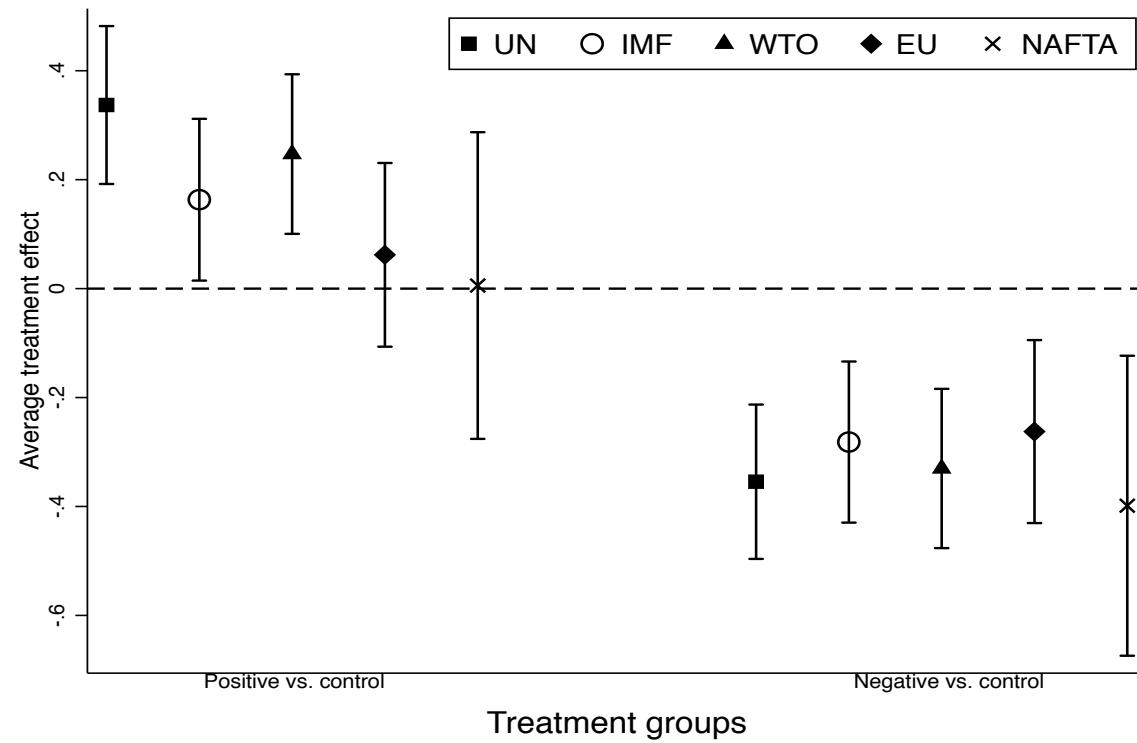
Why do we care?

- 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



Dellmuth and
Tallberg (2016) Elite
communication and
popular legitimacy in
global governance, at
[https://
papers.ssrn.com/
sol3/papers.cfm?
abstract_id=2757650](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2757650)

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

	Democratic	Technocratic	Fair
Procedure	participation accountability	efficiency expertise	impartiality access
Performance	democracy promotion in wider society	problem-solving collective gains	human dignity distributive justice

Source: Scholte and Tallberg (2018), Theorizing the institutional sources of global governance legitimacy, in Tallberg et al. (eds), Legitimacy in Global Governance, OUP

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 or 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)