ANDREW MORAVCSIK

Affirming Democracy in International Organizations

Are international organizations undemocratic? Many activists, politicians, and political scientists believe that globalization and global governance are reducing citizens and their elected politicians to rubber stamps. Decisions are made behind closed doors by networks of unelected diplomats, technocrats, and judges. Neither individual citizens nor national parliaments exercise meaningful oversight. Yale law professor Jed Rubenfeld has contrasted international organizations that are "bureaucratic, diplomatic, technocratic—everything but democratic" with the U.S. Constitution's "process of popular deliberation and consent."

In the United States, international organizations elicit complaints from left and right alike. Conservatives criticize activist lawyers, judges, and NGOs for seeking to import interventionist foreign standards—the death penalty, global warming standards, and gay rights—without running the gamut of the normal legislative process. Progressives worry about the unchecked influence of corporate interests, which appear to use multilateral organizations such as the WTO to protect profits at the expense of social, health, safety, and environmental standards.

"Even in the European Union, the world's most ambitious international institution, around 90% of lawmaking remains under national control." French laws mainly govern the owner, crew, and cargo of this barge passing the European Parliament building in Strasbourg.

Many Europeans share sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf's view that internationalization "invariably means a loss of democracy." The European Union's recent and contentious effort to promulgate a "constitution" was launched in order to bring it "closer to its citizens" and provide "better democratic scrutiny." Yet the impression of illegitimacy was bolstered by referendum defeats in France, the Netherlands, and Ireland before a watered-down version finally passed in 2009 as the Treaty of Lisbon.

Critics propose two remedies. "Sovereigntists" would reassert national sovereignty, reinforce domestic control, and block multilateralization of new issues. "Cosmopolitan democrats" would establish elections, parliaments, and other popular democratic institutions at the global and regional levels. While these criticisms seem intuitively plausible, closer scrutiny reveals important counterarguments.

National institutions impose tight control over international organizations. National governments decide most important questions by consensus, affording each member government a role in either approving or blocking an action. In nearly all bodies, international officials remain weak and secretariats are small. Each government remains responsible to its population in accordance with domestic law. Citizens in democratic societies can reward or punish their governments for the decisions they take in international organizations, just as they would for any other decision. Issues such as payment of UN dues in the United States, compliance with IMF programs in Argentina, or ratification of a new EU constitution in Britain spark spirited domestic debates.

International institutions expand the scope of democratic choice. In an increasingly interdependent world, the advancement of one country's national interest increasingly depends on policies adopted by foreign governments. If citizens wish to defend themselves against external enemies, set an effective environmental standard, or protect human rights at home, they must increasingly do so in cooperation with foreigners.

ANDREW MORAVCSIK is Professor of Politics and International Affairs, and Director of the European Union Program, at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School. He has authored over 100 academic publications on European integration, transatlantic relations, international organizations, global human rights, international relations theory, and Asian regionalism. He is Non-Resident Senior Fellow of the Brookings Institution, Contributing Editor of *Newsweek* magazine, and Book Review Editor (Europe) of *Foreign Affairs* magazine. His policy experience includes service as an international trade negotiator for the U.S. Department of Commerce, special assistant to the Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Korea, and assistant in the press office of the European Commission.

International cooperation offers governments a chance to exchange unilateral policy discretion at home for expanded influence over the policies of foreign governments, thereby realizing vital domestic policy objectives that would otherwise be unachievable. A blanket refusal to delegate authority to multilateral institutions, as sovereigntists recommend, would not only be self-defeating, but would also arbitrarily restrict national democratic choice.

International institutions can improve domestic democratic processes. International institutions may be distant, but critics of multilateralism go to the opposite extreme: They idealize local democracy. National elections and other forms of political representation often contain serious biases and flaws, which international institutions can help correct. Even in European countries, where human rights standards are well established, international courts have imposed higher human rights protection in matters such as the death penalty, gay rights, and the right of asylum. Many international institutions help promote democracy. The WTO helps overcome special interest dominance of unilateral trade policy making.

Governments reserve the issues most salient to voters to themselves. Even in the European Union, the world's most ambitious international institution, around 90 percent of lawmaking remains under national control. These include the most salient issues to citizens: taxing and spending, social welfare provision, health care, pensions, education, law enforcement, local infrastructure, and defense spending. Even at home, we often choose to delegate issues handled by international institutions—such as human rights protection, financial and regulatory policy, nuclear proliferation—to more independent and expert officials and judges. This is as it should be.

If international decisions remain under tight democratic control, why are multilateral institutions so widely perceived as "undemocratic"? In part, this perception reflects the relative unfamiliarity of such institutions and the latent nationalism of publics. But also, many criticisms of "undemocratic" international organizations are advanced by those who are seeking a rhetorical edge in domestic debates about the content of specific decisions. At least critics seem equally divided. The fact that such criticisms appear to come equally from both the left and the right suggests that international organizations are doing something right.

Chapter 3 "International Regimes" p. 89; Chapter 7 "Roles of International Organizations" p. 233; Chapter 10 "Structure of the European Union" p. 359