



Public opinion and international organizations

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Abstract

Public opinion has become an increasingly important issue for international organizations (IOs) in the wake of growing politicization and contestation of global governance. This special issue aims to advance the research field on this topic by examining the ways in which public opinion and IOs are interconnected. In this introduction, we contribute to this aim by identifying three core areas of research: the drivers of public opinion toward IOs, the effects of public opinion on IOs, and the influence of IOs on public opinion. For each area, we introduce key theoretical typologies, review the state of knowledge, and outline how the articles in this special issue advance the field. We conclude by outlining an agenda for future research, calling for scholarship to further explore the interplay between public opinion and IOs, unpack public opinion and global governance, and expand the comparative scope beyond the western context.

Keywords Elite communication · Foreign policy attitudes · Global governance · International organizations · Legitimacy · Public opinion · Public support

For a long time, scholarship assumed that mass publics had little interest in, and knowledge of, foreign affairs unless they experienced a direct threat to their own security or well-being (Berinsky, 2009; Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Researchers colorfully described how US politicians on issues of foreign policy waltzed before a blind audience (Aldrich et al., 1989), and how European publics,

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in a state of permissive consensus, enjoyed the fruits of integration while taking little interest in their production (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970). This image of mass publics as ignorant and disinterested was not only remarkably stable but also had a chilling effect on any effort to explore public opinion toward international cooperation. Yet over the past two decades, this widespread belief has given way to a realization that global publics are more aware and more engaged than previously thought – and that their opinions matter for how world politics plays out.

Publics have mobilized in protests against international organizations (IOs) and treaties, such as the European Union (EU), World Trade Organization (WTO), and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Voters have voiced discontent by supporting anti-globalist parties and politicians, such as Donald Trump in the US, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Syriza in Greece. Citizens have voted in national referenda to accept or reject memberships and agreements, as in Switzerland's decision to join the United Nations (UN), the United Kingdom's (UK) decision to leave the EU, and Iceland's decision to decline an international financial bailout. Civil society has sought greater involvement with IOs, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, and called for these organizations to become more democratic, fair, and effective. And opinion polls, like the World Values Survey (2017–2022, Haerpfer et al., 2024), suggest that citizens on average have medium to high levels of knowledge about global governance.

These developments have spurred a large body of research on public opinion and IOs. If citizens are not ignorant and disinterested, but often aware and engaged, then understanding the nature of their views, how those views come about, and what they mean for politics becomes essential. These broad questions have informed scholarship on public opinion over the past two decades and linked it to research on politicization (De Vries et al., 2021; De Wilde et al., 2016; Zürn et al., 2012), democracy (Archibugi et al., 2012; Ghassim, 2024b; Hobolt, 2012), value cleavages (De Wilde et al., 2019; Hooghe et al., 2002; Kriesi et al., 2006), backlash (Alter & Zürn, 2020; Voeten, 2020; Walter, 2021a), and contestation (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2020; Hooghe et al., 2019; Zürn, 2018) in global governance.

The purpose of this special issue is to further advance the research frontier on public opinion and IOs. It accomplishes this goal in four main ways. Thematically, the special issue takes on novel questions that have not received sustained attention in past scholarship, such as the role of citizen peers (Ecker-Ehrhardt et al., 2025a) and great power leadership (Arias & Hulvey, 2025) in shaping people's legitimacy beliefs toward IOs. Theoretically, the special issue develops new concepts and conjectures, such as the notion of a cooperation-contestation trade-off to explain when governments blame or defend IOs in the shadow of public opinion (Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2025). Empirically, the special issue expands the scope of analysis beyond the conventional terrain to consider, for instance, public opinion in the Global South toward different types of international lenders (Bulman et al., 2025), public support for domestic institutions as global governors (Allen & Sahasrabudde, 2025), and effects of transparency on international bureaucratic behavior in light of national media attention and public opinion (Park & Kim, 2025). Methodologically, the special issue spans a broad range of techniques, from more conventional surveys and

experiments to a rare multiannual citizen panel study (Koru & Mutz, 2025) and large-scale social media and survey-based field experiments (Chang et al., 2025).

Our primary focus is public opinion toward IOs. By public opinion, we mean aggregate individual attitudes and beliefs within a given community (cf. Shapiro & Jacobs, 2011, p. 721), and by IOs we mean formal, multilateral, and bureaucratic arrangements established to further cooperation among states (Pevehouse et al., 2020). Public opinion may be disaggregated into the opinions of specific groups in society, for instance, by comparing the opinions of elites to those of citizens at large (Dellmuth et al., 2022; Kertzer, 2022). IOs are core pillars of the contemporary system of global governance and play frontline roles in combatting transboundary problems. Concentrating on IOs means giving less attention to other forms of authority in global governance (Barnett et al., 2021; Weiss & Wilkinson, 2019). Yet there is nothing inherent in our research agenda on public opinion and IOs that restricts it from being extended to private, bilateral, or informal arrangements. Indeed, some contributions to this special issue analyze public opinion in relation to a broader set of global governance institutions (Allen & Sahasrabudde, 2025; Bulman et al., 2025).

In this introduction, we make several contributions toward the aim of the special issue. First, we characterize the landscape of scholarship by identifying three distinct areas of research: the drivers of public opinion toward IOs, the effects of public opinion on IOs, and the influence of IOs on public opinion. Second, we review the state of knowledge within each area and position the articles of the special issue in relation to the research front. In the process, we introduce concepts, mechanisms, and typologies that are useful for understanding the dynamics of public opinion. Third, we conclude by presenting an agenda for future research, focused on exploring the interplay between public opinion and IOs, unpacking public opinion and global governance, and broadening the comparative scope of inquiry.

These contributions build on a review of existing research organized around three key themes (Fig. 1). These themes represent our reading of the principal areas of research on public opinion and IOs. Together, they capture how public opinion may function both as an independent and a dependent variable in analyses of global governance.¹

The first theme explores the drivers behind public opinion toward IOs. What are the factors that shape people's attitudes toward these organizations? We build on earlier scholarship to propose a distinction between individual, organizational, and communicative drivers. The second theme takes public opinion as given and then explores its effects on IOs. In what ways and under what conditions does public opinion shape the actions and decisions of IOs? We suggest that public opinion may work through direct pathways, when it has an immediate impact on IOs, and indirect pathways, when it affects IOs through a third party, such as national governments. The third theme reverses the causal arrow to explore the influence of IOs on public opinion. When and how are IOs capable of affecting public opinion on domestic and

¹ We recognize that these factors may be linked in additional and more complex ways, but leave those out of this framework, which is focused on the three core areas of research. For instance, IOs may through their policies affect individual drivers, such as economic utility or social identity (e.g., Kern et al., 2024; Risse, 2015), which in turn could impact public opinion.



Fig. 1 Special issue framework

international matters? We argue that IOs engage in several types of communication—endorsement, criticism, and self-legitimation—that may impact public opinion.

We conclude this article by laying out an agenda for future research, highlighting four specific avenues. To start with, we call for more research on the interplay between public opinion and IOs, as our review shows these relationships to be less explored than the drivers of public opinion toward IOs. Second, future research should unpack public opinion by examining and comparing subsets of the public, especially the differences and interactions between elites and citizens at large. Third, it is important to unpack global governance by exploring how insights from the study of public opinion toward IOs may extend to other types of institutions, such as international treaties, multistakeholder arrangements, and private governance initiatives. Finally, we argue that the research field would benefit from a broader comparative perspective, including greater attention to public opinion and IOs in a non-Western context.

1 Drivers of public opinion toward IOs

The first theme of research pertains to sources of public opinion toward IOs. What are key factors shaping citizen views of IOs? Scholarship on this topic tends to break down into three types of explanations, emphasizing individual, organizational, and communicative drivers, respectively. Research that takes the individual as the starting point attributes attitudes toward IOs to characteristics of the person holding them, such as interest calculation, political values, and social identification. Scholarship that adopts the organization as the starting point assumes that opinions arise from institutional features of IOs, such as their procedures and performances. Finally, research that takes its starting point in the information process theorizes how public opinion toward IOs is shaped by mechanisms such as framing, cueing, and (de-)legitimation. In practice, drivers at these various levels tend to interact in shaping public opinion toward IOs (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023; Schlipphak et al., 2024). Several contributions to this special issue push this agenda forward by further exploring how public opinion vis-à-vis IOs is shaped by factors at these three levels of analysis.

1.1 Individual-level explanations

Explanations privileging individual-level factors have traditionally assumed a prominent role in the literature on public opinion toward IOs. The debate centers on which individual-level logics best explain variation in citizen attitudes toward IOs. Slightly

simplified, it features four main positions (Dellmuth et al., 2022; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2005). The first emphasizes economic utility and expects people to form opinions toward IOs based on cost-benefit assessments (Anderson & Reichert, 1995; Bearce & Jolliff Scott, 2019; Curtis et al., 2014; Gabel, 1998). This argument builds on a logic emphasizing utilitarian calculation and people's position in the economy as central to the formation of opinions on international matters (Lake, 2009; Rodrik, 2018; Scheve & Slaughter, 2004). IOs and their policies produce uneven economic consequences for people, depending on their skills and resources, and these differential effects lead individuals to adopt varying attitudes toward these organizations and their policies. Studies indicate that this logic helps to explain attitudes toward the EU (Anderson & Reichert, 1995; Foster & Frieden, 2021; Gabel, 1998; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016) and IOs generally (Dellmuth et al., 2022; Edwards, 2009).

A second position stresses political values and suggests that ideological orientation shapes people's attitudes toward IOs. This argument builds on research that documents an impact of values (Kertzer et al., 2014) and ideology on attitudes toward international matters (De Wilde et al., 2019; Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007; Hooghe et al., 2019; Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Rathbun et al., 2016). This literature argues that contestation over international issues follows one or several lines of value conflict. Some studies maintain that the left-right spectrum, so prominent in domestic politics, also structures attitudes toward international affairs (Hooghe et al., 2002; Noël & Thérien, 2008). Others point to the relevance of another axis of ideological contestation, distinguishing between green, alternative, and liberal (GAL) values on the one hand, and traditional, authoritarian, and nationalist (TAN) values on the other (Hooghe et al., 2019; Kriesi et al., 2006). Studies indicate that political ideology along these two dimensions shapes public opinion toward IOs, particularly in the US (Brutger & Clark, 2023; Dellmuth et al., 2022; Von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2024), and especially when considering citizens' priors about the ideological orientation of IOs (Ecker-Ehrhardt et al., 2024).

A third position highlights social identity and predicts that people with more cosmopolitan orientations are more favorably disposed toward IOs. This argument draws on research concerning social identity in general, and geographical identification in particular, as a source of attitudes toward international matters (Bayram, 2017; Hooghe & Marks, 2005; McLaren, 2006; Mutz et al., 2021; Weßels, 2007). This logic suggests that public support for IOs aligns more with a global identification than a national disposition. Individuals with a global identification favor international governance because it links political authority with the global community to which they feel attached, whereas individuals who feel closer to their country view IOs as a lower priority or even as a threat to national identity (Verhaegen et al., 2018). This logic has figured prominently in studies explaining public opinion toward the EU (Carey, 2002; Hooghe & Marks, 2005), but also appears to be at play in the context of global IOs, such as the UN, which tend to enjoy greater support from people who identify with the world (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2015; Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2016; Furia, 2005; Norris, 2000; Torgler, 2008).

Finally, a fourth position emphasizes domestic experiences and attitudes, expecting either positive or negative relationships with opinions toward IOs. This argu-

ment draws on research that highlights linkages between attitudes toward domestic and international governance (De Vries, 2018; Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2020; Muñoz et al., 2011; Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000; Schlipphak, 2015). This literature shows positive correlations between individuals' trust in domestic political institutions and their trust in IOs as diverse as the EU, International Criminal Court (ICC), IMF, UN, and WTO (Armingeon & Ceka, 2014; Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2020; Hartevelde et al., 2013; Voeten, 2013). A few studies instead theorize a negative relationship, where people develop attitudes toward IOs in contrast to their evaluations of domestic economic and political circumstances (De Vries, 2018; Sánchez-Cuenca, 2000).

In this special issue, one contribution in particular advances our knowledge about individual-level sources of public opinion toward IOs. Koru & Mutz (2025) ask whether Americans hold reliable opinions about IOs, how those opinions have changed over time, and what factors best explain those opinions. Using a five-wave panel survey in combination with a survey experiment, their study investigates opinion change among the same individuals over time, unlike previous research which focuses on cross-sections at specific points in time. Koru and Mutz show that Americans tend to have stable views of IOs, even if those opinions rarely distinguish between different IOs, indicating that citizens rely on heuristics to form their views. This conclusion is further strengthened by experimental results showing that even completely fictitious organizations—regardless of their activities—are perceived by Republicans to be more liberal when they are described as international as opposed to national in scope. Analyzing patterns over time in American public opinion toward four IOs, they observe no overall decline in support but increasing polarization by political party.

1.2 Organizational-level explanations

Explanations privileging organizational-level factors have a long theoretical pedigree but were until recently difficult to test empirically. With the advent of survey experiments, it has become possible for researchers to examine systematically whether and how institutional features of IOs matter for people's opinions toward these organizations. Inspired by Scharpf's (1999) distinction between input- and output-based legitimacy, much of this literature has distinguished between procedure and performance as two generic institutional sources of public opinion toward IOs (Bernauer et al., 2020; Bernauer & Gampfer, 2013; Dellmuth et al., 2019; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Recent scholarship has moved beyond this dichotomy to explore the role of other institutional features, such as authority, purpose, and membership, for public opinion toward international agreements and organizations (e.g. Anderson et al., 2019; Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023; Ghassim et al., 2024; Schlipphak et al., 2024; Spilker et al., 2018; Steiner, 2018; Vasilopoulou et al., 2024).

The premise of procedural accounts is that process criteria are important for attitudes toward IOs. Procedural accounts have an early antecedent in Weber's notion of legal-rational sources of legitimacy (Weber, 1978). On this argument, individuals support an IO because of how it is set up and operates. For example, citizens might approve of the UNFCCC because its policy-making is perceived to involve a broad range of stakeholders (Bäckstrand et al., 2021). Conversely, they might disapprove of

the IMF because its decision-making process is seen to give some states disproportionate weight (McDowell et al., 2024). For procedural accounts, attitudes toward an IO derive from the way the organization functions, irrespective of the consequences of its policies. For instance, procedures which allow for greater civil society involvement also translate into greater support for global environmental governance (Bernauer & Gampfer, 2013; Ecker-Ehrhardt et al., 2025b). Similarly, procedures which give major powers a special say in decision-making suffer in terms of public support in other countries (Johnson, 2011), while the effects of a state's own influence in decision-making on public support for this IO are complex (Brutger & Clark, 2023; Clark et al., 2025; Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2016; Tallberg & Verhaegen, 2020).

Other accounts emphasize performance as an institutional source of IO support. IOs might gain or lose approval depending on whether people see them as enhancing or undermining desired outcomes, such as distributive justice and problem-solving (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2015; Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2016). For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) might gain in support if citizens perceive that it effectively prevents epidemics, while the World Bank might lose in support if individuals believe that it fails to reduce poverty. For performance approaches, public opinion toward an IO derives from its impacts, irrespective of the procedures used to formulate the relevant policy. Research provides several examples of this logic. For instance, Dellmuth et al. (2019) show that individuals grant greater support to IOs when the performance of these organizations yields outcomes that are more democratic, effective, and fair. Similarly, Bernauer et al. (2020) demonstrate that information about the quality of outcomes affects citizen support for cooperation on transboundary air pollution.

Recent studies have moved beyond procedure and performance to explore how additional institutional features affect public opinion toward IOs. One such feature is the authority of IOs, meaning an IO's right to make collective decisions within an issue area (Zürn, 2018). While some research expects IOs with greater authority to have a harder time securing the approval of citizens (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019), empirical studies present a more varied and complicated picture (Anderson et al., 2019; Schlipphak et al., 2024). Another institutional feature is the purpose of IOs, understood as the goals of the organization. A few studies have theorized (Barnett, 1997; Lenz & Viola, 2017) and examined (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023; Nielson et al., 2019) the impact of an IO's purpose on support for the organization, on the intuition that some goals make IOs more attractive in the eyes of citizens than others.

In this special issue, two articles contribute to developing organizational-level explanations of public opinion toward IOs. Arias & Hulvey (2025) argue that great powers assuming leadership positions within IOs—in their case China in the UN—can use these positions to generate more positive opinions among targeted state audiences. Their study advances previous scholarship on how memberships matter for IO legitimacy (Johnson, 2011) by exploring the specific role of state leadership in IOs. Based on survey experiments in Brazil and France, they conclude that great power leadership indeed matters for perceptions of IO legitimacy and for perceptions of the state itself. Notably, Chinese leadership negatively affects the legitimacy of the UN in both Brazil and France. Moreover, China's leadership shapes images of a more responsible power in the more China-skeptical context of France, but not in the more China-friendly context of Brazil. While the negative impact of corresponding US leadership on the

UN's legitimacy is more muted, the findings from China and the US together suggest that IO legitimacy is susceptible to perceptions of capture by great powers.

Bulman et al. (2025) advances the state of knowledge on organizational-level determinants by exploring how the type of lender matters for public opinion toward international lenders in the Global South. They theorize that publics are sensitive to the sovereignty implications of foreign debt and therefore are more positive toward international lenders perceived to infringe less on sovereignty. Examining this logic through a survey experiment in nine middle-income countries across three regions, they find that publics tend to be more favorably disposed toward traditional multilateral lenders—the IMF and World Bank—as well as private lenders, than toward US lending and even less Chinese lending.

1.3 Communicative-level explanations

Explanations emphasizing communicative-level factors have in recent years become increasingly prominent in research on public opinion toward IOs. Much of this literature is framed in terms of legitimation and delegitimation as communicative processes aimed at boosting or undermining people's approval of IOs (Bexell et al., 2022; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Theoretically, this literature is inspired by Weber's (1978, p. 213) notion that every system of authority "attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy," but also theories of cueing and framing in political psychology (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Druckman & Lupia, 2000). Empirically, it is spurred by a sense of growing contestation and politicization of IOs around the world (De Vries et al., 2021; De Wilde et al., 2016; Walter, 2021a).

The main substantive focus of this body of literature is the influence of elite communication on public opinion toward IOs. The expectation of elite influence usually builds on the assumption that citizens rely on heuristics when forming opinions about IOs and therefore are receptive to elite communication, which offers such a heuristic (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023). While early studies focused on the impact of party cueing and elite polarization in the context of the EU (De Vries & Edwards, 2009; Gabel & Scheve, 2007; Hooghe & Marks, 2005; Maier et al., 2012; Schuck & de Vreese, 2006), later research has broadened the empirical scope. Several studies have examined the impact of communication by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), member states, and IOs themselves on public opinion toward IOs such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), IMF, North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), UN, WHO, and WTO (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2021; Ghassim, 2024a; Hicks et al., 2014; Schlipphak et al., 2022).

While showing that elite communication can shape citizen perceptions of IOs, research also indicates that not all communication is equally impactful. For instance, in terms of senders, communication by member states and civil society tends to be more effective, since external elites often are perceived as more credible communicators about IOs than the organizations themselves (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2021; Ghassim, 2024a; Lupton & Webb, 2022)—a topic we return to below (see section

“IO Influence on Public Opinion”). In terms of messages, negative communication tends to be more impactful than positive communication, likely because of general sociopsychological dynamics (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023; Dür & Schlipphak, 2021; Johnson & Tierney, 2019), even if competing frames may help to offset negative effects (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Moreover, evidence from US public opinion on the ICC suggests that exposure to competing frames about the ICC leads citizens to hold more moderate positions about the ICC than exposure to a single frame (Zvobgo, 2019). In terms of receivers, citizens tend to be particularly receptive when holding partisan beliefs aligned with those of communicating elites, not least in the politically polarized US setting (Brutger & Clark, 2023; Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023; Guisinger & Saunders, 2017; Von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2024).

In this special issue, three contributions advance the field beyond earlier research on the impact of communication. Heinkelmann-Wild et al. (2025) ask when and how governments blame IOs to avoid being held responsible for policies unpopular with the public. They argue that IO scapegoating may not be as pervasive as commonly thought, since member states also experience costs to cooperation from this strategy. Examining their argument in the context of the IMF, they find that member states in fact defend this IO more often than blame it, thus providing a corrective to common perceptions of scapegoating in global governance.

Ecker-Ehrhardt et al. (2025a) move away from communication by elites to provide one of the first studies of how other people’s attitudes toward IOs (peer opinion) affect citizens’ legitimacy beliefs toward these organization (see also Malet, 2022; Walter, 2021b). They argue that people strive for social conformity in opinions and therefore are receptive to information about the attitudes of others toward IOs. They examine this logic through survey experiments in Brazil, Germany, and the US that evaluate multiple sources of peer opinion. They establish that peer opinion indeed shapes legitimacy beliefs toward IOs and that this effect tends to be particularly strong when peer opinion is more negative and unified. Altogether, their findings suggest that people form opinions toward IOs through communicative processes that are more horizontal than previously understood.

Allen & Sahasrabuddhe (2025) instead focus on the content of communication and ask how informational cues about the global role of the US Federal Reserve influence public attitudes toward this institution. Their contribution goes beyond the conventional focus on IOs in this literature (and in this special issue) to examine how cues matter for attitudes toward a domestic institution involved in global governance. Distinguishing between procedural cues and performance cues, they examine the effect of such information on citizens’ level of policy support and trust in the Federal Reserve, using two survey experiments. They find that procedural and performance cues affect attitudes toward policy support and trust differently. While procedural cues impact trust in the institution but not support for its policies, performance cues impact support for its policies but not institutional trust. These findings suggest that informational cues about organizational features of global governance institutions affect public attitudes in more complex ways than previously understood.

2 Effects of public opinion on IOs

The second theme of research pertains to effects of public opinion on IOs. It reverses the causal arrow to consider whether, when, and how public opinion affects the institutions and policies of IOs. It is a theme that addresses the perennial “so what?” question in studies of public opinion and IOs. Does it really matter for IOs what the public thinks about them? After all, IOs are not accountable to publics in the same way as national governments, so why would public opinion have an effect on how IOs organize and carry out their mandates? Research on this topic has been hamstrung by problems of establishing causality in this relationship, since it is methodologically very challenging to identify effects of public opinion on decisions by IO elites. However, in recent years, studies have made progress on this subject by using novel observational and experimental data to examine the responsiveness of IOs to public opinion. This special issue helps to advance this agenda by exploring the conditions under which IOs are more or less sensitive to public opinion.

2.1 Why public opinion matters

There are several reasons to think that IOs would care about public opinion. Whether IOs enjoy the support of the general public may affect their standing, capacity, and impact (Sommerer et al., 2022; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). First, public opinion may influence whether IOs remain relevant as the focal arena for states’ efforts to coordinate policies and solve problems. In a world of forum shopping, having public opinion on your side is an important resource for IOs wishing to fend off multilateral competitors and unilateral action (Morse & Keohane, 2014; Zelli, 2018). For instance, the dwindling approval of the ICC in Africa is widely seen as a challenge for the court’s relevance, leading to demands for the establishment of an African court (Zimmermann et al., 2023).

Second, public opinion may affect the capabilities of IOs in terms of legal mandates to carry out their activities, institutional procedures to develop their policies, and material resources to fund their operations (Sommerer et al., 2022). If IOs are unpopular with electorates, governments may be less likely to equip them with the capacities they need to carry out their functions, especially if such empowerment competes with national sovereignty and domestic investment. For instance, successive rejections of new EU treaties by citizens in several countries, as well as Britain’s vote to leave the EU, have put plans for further large-scale institutional reforms on the back burner.

Third, public opinion may affect IOs’ ability to develop and implement new rules and norms. When IOs propose policies that meet with low popular approval, this may make it more difficult to gain governments’ support at the decision-making stage, leading to non-adoption or diluted ambitions (Martin, 2000; Sommerer & Agné, 2018). For instance, negotiations between the EU and the US over TTIP were shelved in 2016 following intense popular opposition in Europe (Young, 2017). By the same token, unpopular IO policies may have a harder time garnering the support required for domestic implementation, requiring IOs either to deploy costly sanctions or to accept non-compliance (Chaudoin, 2014; Chilton & Linos, 2021). Since few IOs

command the coercive power to compel states to comply, popular legitimacy is particularly important in global governance (Franck, 1990; Hurd, 1999).

Finally, public opinion toward IOs also matters for normative concerns that have come to the fore in recent decades. When IOs lack support in society, this contributes to a democratic deficit in global governance (Dahl, 1999; Held & Koenig-Archibugi, 2005; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). As political authority has shifted to the global level, democracy's preservation requires that IOs both are structured in accordance with democratic principles and are perceived by citizens as legitimate systems of governance. It would be normatively problematic if the public lacks faith in the legitimacy of IOs and is reluctant to engage with them. For instance, low popular turnout in elections to the European Parliament is often seen as a democratic weakness of the EU and has led European policymakers to undertake multiple reforms (European Parliament, 2024; Follesdal & Hix, 2006).

The notion that public opinion matters for IOs is widespread (Schneider, 2019; Sommerer et al., 2022; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). It forms the starting assumption of extensive research on how IOs gain and cultivate popular approval (e.g. Bexell et al., 2022; Dellmuth et al., 2022; Von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2024; Zaum, 2013; Zürn, 2018). It is rooted in a long tradition of theorizing in political science and sociology on the legitimacy of political institutions (Beetham, 1991; Booth & Seligson, 2009; Easton, 1975; Weber, 1978). And it appears to be borne out by the actions of IOs themselves, which generally have strengthened their capacity for public communication (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2018) and often conduct their own public opinion polling, as illustrated by the EU's *Eurobarometer* and the World Bank's *Listening to the Citizens* surveys.

Yet this notion does not stand unchallenged. According to an alternative proposition, popular approval is of no or limited importance for IOs, since citizens allegedly take little interest in what these organizations do and have few mechanisms for holding them accountable, giving IO decision-makers little reason to worry about public opinion (Dahl, 1999; Moravcsik, 2004). Instead, the role of IOs in global governance is determined by other factors than public opinion, such as state interests and power (Martin & Simmons, 2012). This expectation unites realist understandings of IOs (Wohlforth, 2020), pessimistic positions on international law (Goldsmith & Posner, 2005), and Marxist accounts of global outcomes (Cammack, 2022), all of which assign popular legitimacy limited causal importance.

2.2 How public opinion matters

Broadly speaking, public opinion may impact IOs through two main pathways. The effect of public opinion can materialize through direct pathways, when citizens express their attitudes toward IOs in ways that directly reduce or enhance these organizations' reputation, capacity or impact (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005; O'Brien et al., 2000; Walter, 2021b). Examples include citizen protests that disrupt IO meetings, such as the infamous "Battle of Seattle" afflicting the WTO in 1999, and societal resistance to IO policies, such as defiance of WHO guidelines during the Covid-19 pandemic. Alternatively, the effect may come about through indirect pathways, when citizen attitudes toward IOs lead member governments to take decisions that affect the

reputation, capacity or impact of these organizations (Hagemann et al., 2017; Schneider, 2019; Sommerer & Tallberg, 2026). Examples include public opinion motivating national governments to oppose IO empowerment, as in the case of British Euroscepticism, and to reject particular IO policies, as in the case of German opposition to financial bailouts during the Eurozone crisis. The key difference between direct and indirect pathways is thus that effects in the first case are unmediated by other actors or structures, whereas effects in the latter case materialize through the impact on national governments as principals of IOs.

When public opinion affects IOs through direct pathways, this typically occurs through some form of societal mobilization against IOs, such as street protests, online actions, legal challenges, or referendum campaigns (Bexell et al., 2022; Walter, 2021b). The assumption is that public opinion, when mobilized in this way, can impose costs on IOs, for instance, by making key actors more reluctant to support new policies, by forcing IOs to divert attention to alternative agendas, or by disrupting the operations of IOs. In the dramatic examples of the WTO's Seattle meeting (1999), the IMF and World Bank's Prague meeting (2000), the EU's Gothenburg meeting (2001), the G8's Genoa meeting (2001), and the Copenhagen meeting of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (2009), societal mobilization had both a concrete impact on the proceedings and a political impact on cooperation. When public opinion is mobilized against IOs in national referenda on memberships or treaties, the implication can even be to transform the structure of an IO, as in the case of Britain's exit from the EU (Hobolt, 2009; Walter, 2021b).

Substantively, societal contestation usually targets the institutional arrangements or the substantive policies of IOs (Zürn et al., 2019). Such calls for reform were particularly intense in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when social movements engaged in large-scale protests against multilateral economic institutions (e.g., O'Brien et al. 2000; Della Porta & Tarrow 2005; Kalm & Uhlin 2015). In more recent times, key areas of societal contestation include climate change (Della Porta et al., 2015), development (Kalm & Uhlin, 2015), trade and finance (Azedi & Schofer 2023), and security (Olczak, 2024). Demands often call for IOs to reform institutions in favor of greater democracy and justice, and for IOs to pay greater attention to environmental and social concerns in their policies (Scholte 2012; Della Porta et al. 2015; Allan & Hadden 2017; Stephen & Zürn 2019). A range of studies suggest that IOs are sensitive to such societal contestation, which may lead them to change communication practices (Dingwerth et al., 2019; Moschella et al., 2020), substantive policies (Gregoratti et al., 2022; Hernandez, 2020), and institutional arrangements (Schimmelfennig et al., 2020; Tallberg et al., 2013).

When public opinion affects IOs through indirect pathways, the key mechanism is responsiveness to citizen attitudes on the part of national governments (Hagemann et al., 2017; Schneider, 2019; Sommerer & Tallberg 2026; Wrátil et al., 2023). Responsiveness to public opinion has received extensive attention in earlier research. A large literature in comparative politics conceives of responsiveness as a core quality of democratic governance, leading it to explore the link between public opinion and public policy (Page & Shapiro, 1983; Powell, 2004; Soroka & Wlezién, 2009). In international relations, research on responsiveness has focused especially on the link between public opinion and foreign policy. A key issue of debate has been whether

foreign policy is as responsive to citizen preferences as domestic policy (Almond, 1977; Guisinger, 2009; Huber et al., 2020; Page & Bouton, 2007). A number of studies suggest that citizens are concerned about foreign policy and that governments are responsive to these preferences because of the political costs they could incur if they were to contravene public opinion (Aldrich et al., 2006; Fearon, 1994; Saunders, 2022; Tomz et al., 2020).

In the context of IOs, responsiveness works through a two-step principal-agent model, where citizens at a first stage delegate power to national governments as agents (Strøm et al., 2003) and national governments at a second stage act as the collective principals of an IO (Hawkins et al., 2006). Responsiveness, then, entails that national governments take public opinion into account when making decisions about the mandates, institutions, resources, and policies of IOs. A key factor shaping responsiveness is the growing salience of IOs in domestic politics. IOs have become increasingly politicized in recent years, such that member state policies toward IOs nowadays often are subject to intense public debate (De Vries et al., 2021; Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Zürn et al., 2012). Whether publics are for or against empowering IOs at the expense of national sovereignty has become one of the constituent features of a new conflict dimension in domestic politics (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2006).

For national governments, the growing salience of IOs in domestic politics provides incentives to be responsive to citizen preferences toward global governance. If citizens care deeply about IOs, then contravening public opinion could be associated with political costs for governments (Fearon, 1994; Tomz, 2007). Going against public opinion on a salient issue could make it harder for the government to gain support in the legislature for its preferred policies, since other parties are likely to exploit public dissatisfaction with the government's course of action. Defying public opinion on issues that people care deeply about could also hurt the standing of the government in the polls and, in the worst of cases, impact its chances of reelection (Aldrich et al., 2006; Baum & Potter, 2008; Saunders, 2022). This logic is likely to be particularly strong in democracies, where governments are dependent on public support, but may also extend to autocracies, since authoritarian leaders, too, rule more safely with public opinion on their side (Hyde & Saunders, 2020; Schoner, 2024).

Recent observational and experimental research offers support for this logic. Schneider (2019) shows that national governments signal responsiveness to their domestic publics in the process of EU cooperation by taking positions that are in the interests of politically relevant voters and defending those positions throughout negotiations (see also Hagemann et al., 2017). Similarly, Sommerer and Tallberg (2026) demonstrate through an elite experiment that national politicians take public opinion into consideration when making decisions about the authority and resources of IOs. Covering both societal and state contestation of a broad range of IOs, Sommerer et al. (2022) conclude that heightened levels of contestation have complex effects on material, institutional, and decision-making capacities of IOs: while some analyses indicate a negative association, others suggest a positive or conditional relationship (see also Agné & Söderbaum, 2022).

In this special issue, one article in particular helps to advance our knowledge about the effects of public opinion on IOs. Conceiving of public opinion as a background

condition, Park & Kim (2025) examine how an IO's degree of transparency affects the behavior of international bureaucrats. Theoretically, they develop competing expectations about the impact of transparency on bureaucratic behavior. Empirically, they focus on a de-restriction reform at the WTO in 2002. Their findings show how greater disclosure of documents led to greater national newspaper coverage, in turn affecting how IO bureaucrats report on member state divisions in the negotiations. This study provides rare evidence on the multiple steps linking public opinion to IO behavior.

3 IO influence on public opinion

The third theme pertains to the impact of IOs on public opinion toward a variety of foreign and domestic policy issues, including IOs themselves. The main mechanism of influence is communication by IOs (Greenhill, 2020; Mikulaschek, 2023), which we understand as discursive messages conveying information about a particular topic to the broader public (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023, p. 2; see also Dingwerth et al., 2019; Lenz & Schmidtke, 2023). Over the past 75 years, IOs have become increasingly public by developing professionalized communication departments that design strategies and produce messages for the purpose of influencing public opinion (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2018). IO communication takes multiple forms, including statements by IO leaders, flagship reports, and engagement with intermediaries such as NGOs, states, or celebrities (Rauh, 2023). News media are a key channel through which such IO communication influences public opinion (Chaudoin, 2023; Mikulaschek & Parizek, 2025).

Scholarship theorizes that IO communication influences public opinion since citizens typically have low levels of political awareness (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Dellmuth, 2016) and usually perceive IOs as credible authorities (Chapman, 2009; Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023; Fang, 2008). Based on these assumptions, studies have documented effects of IO communication on public opinion in a range of areas. These studies challenge realist views that IOs need enforcement measures to be politically relevant and suggest that IOs can exert influence via public opinion. However, research on this topic suffers from fragmentation, since distinct literatures have developed on specific forms of IO communication—endorsements, criticisms, and self-legitimation—often linked to specific issue areas. When endorsing, IOs publicly support certain political positions to shape public opinion, especially on the use of force. When criticizing, IOs try to influence attitudes by naming and shaming or otherwise expressing disapproval of domestic actions, often related to human rights. When engaging in self-legitimation, IOs aim to bolster public support for rules and norms that form the basis of their own legitimacy. This special issue helps to advance this agenda through a contribution providing new insights into the effects of IO self-legitimation on public opinion.

3.1 Endorsements

Endorsements are likely the most commonly studied form of IO influence. Most of existing research focuses on whether IO endorsements can shape public opinion on

states' use of force. When IOs endorse military interventions, they can directly bolster domestic support for those actions but also signal to elites in third states about the intentions of the coercing states (Thompson, 2006). Chapman (2009), for instance, argues that IO authorization of war may boost public support because it can reduce domestic constraints and prompt governments to seek external approval.

Consistent with these insights, a number of studies have found that endorsements by IOs can increase public support for military action (Bearce & Cook, 2018; Chapman, 2011; Johns & Davies, 2014; Lushenko et al., 2022; Mikulaschek, 2017; Tago & Ikeda, 2015; Voeten, 2020; Wallace, 2019). Effects of IO endorsements are stronger among certain individuals, for example, citizens who value the IO in question and citizens who have little trust in domestic institutions (Grieco et al., 2011; Mikulaschek, 2023). Effects also appear to depend on which of the UN Security Council's permanent members is expected to cast a veto on the use of force in the particular case (Matsumura & Tago, 2019).

While still limited in comparison, evidence from other issue areas is growing. Greenhill (2020), for instance, finds that endorsements by the UN of policies such as REDD+ deforestation and Syrian refugee resettlement affect public support more than endorsements by IOs with technical competence or by prominent NGOs. In another study, Greenhill (2010) shows that IO diffusion of human rights norms can impact elite beliefs, translating into state human rights practices more in line with international law. Kuzushima et al. (2025) investigate whether governments can garner public support for controversial tax policies by referencing IO endorsements, and find this to be the case especially when IOs are perceived to be aligned with national interests. Heinzel & Liese (2021) examine the impact of endorsements by the WHO on citizen support for public measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 and find positive effects only among those citizens that judge the WHO to have very high expertise. Finally, Chapman & Li (2023) show that IOs (and NGOs) are most effective in shaping public opinion toward tech regulation, especially among internationalist citizens.

3.2 Criticisms

Research on IO criticisms has mostly examined how and under what conditions condemnations by IOs of state actions or policies affect public opinion. For example, studies show that UN criticism decreases support for drone strikes in the US public (Kreps & Wallace, 2016) and hurts public opinion toward Russia in a sample of 49 countries, especially when media coverage of the UN's resolution on Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory is high (Mikulaschek & Parizek, 2025). Research has also shown criticisms by the WTO to matter for opinion formation about economic policy (Bearce & Cook, 2018).

Much of this literature focuses on human rights, exploring whether "naming and shaming" by IOs can affect public opinion and promote domestic reform. Some studies indicate that IO shaming may have certain positive effects on domestic human rights practices (Hafner-Burton, 2008), especially when civil society organizations help to publicize these decisions (Schoner, 2024). Other studies find that IO shaming can weaken domestic support for government policies that break international law

(DeMeritt, 2012; Koliev et al., 2022; Schoner, 2026; Stiansen et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025).

However, shaming also risks creating a backlash and undermining support for IOs (Greenhill & Reiter, 2022). For example, international court investigations can provoke public resistance, especially when individuals feel geographically close to the investigation (Chapman & Chaudoin, 2020). When IO criticism comes in the form of sanctions, it can trigger nationalist backlash and a rally-around-the-flag effect (Grossman et al., 2018). Court rulings on domestic regulations, policies, or leaders' offenses may also polarize citizens, particularly when populist politicians use them in mobilization campaigns (Voeten, 2020).

Comparative research shows that shaming by NGOs is more likely to produce backlash, while shaming by IOs does not appear to have that effect (Greenhill & Reiter 2022). Still, evidence on IOs' ability to persuade publics about human rights violations is mixed. The effects of IO communication on domestic public opinion are blunted when citizens read news media coverage that amplifies the voices of IO opponents and emphasizes contestation over the violations (Chaudoin, 2023). It also depends on whether citizens perceive the states that are pointed out as human rights violators as allies or enemies (Bayram et al., 2024).

3.3 Self-legitimation

A third line of inquiry into IO influence focuses on self-legitimation by IOs (Dingwerth, Schmidtke, et al., 2019; Gronau, 2016; von Billerbeck, 2020; Zaum, 2013). Self-legitimation refers to efforts by an IO to boost perceptions of its own legitimacy in a given audience (Bexell et al., 2022; Gronau & Schmidtke, 2016). While self-legitimation can be discursive, behavioral, or institutional (Bäckstrand & Söderbaum, 2018), the literature has mainly focused on discursive behavior by IOs seeking to increase their own legitimacy in the eyes of citizens and elites. This agenda has inspired several studies that examine whether IO self-legitimation efforts in fact are successful in impacting public opinion – a topic we have addressed briefly above (see sub-section “[Communicative-Level Explanations](#)”).

Survey experiments suggest that IOs' attempts at self-legitimation have mixed success. Some find no or weak effects of IO self-legitimation (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2021). Others find that IO self-legitimation does not impact public opinion on its own, but can be effective in countering criticism of IOs by NGOs (Ghassim, 2024a). One explanation for the inconclusive evidence may be that IOs lack credibility when promoting themselves and come across as less impartial than actors like civil society (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2021). Another may be that IOs are still developing their capacity to explain and defend their actions to the public, especially in a polarized social media landscape (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2023). A third possibility is that, while IOs' own communication often is positive, news media tend to use negative narratives, overshadowing self-legitimizing messages (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023, Chap. 2). Overall, why self-legitimation works only to a limited extent remains an open question and more evidence is needed.

In this special issue, one article in particular contributes to advancing this research agenda. Chang et al. (2025) start from the premise that many IOs are seeking to

diversify their funding sources by appealing to individual donors, including citizens. Yet little is known about whether and how IOs can motivate the public to contribute financially to IOs. To shed light on this issue, the authors conducted a series of pre-registered social media and survey-based field experiments, involving over 22 million Facebook users in five countries (Brazil, Egypt, India, Saudi Arabia, and the UK). The findings indicate that legitimacy appeals have limited impact on individuals' willingness or decision to donate. These results suggest that it may be more difficult for IOs to affect public behavior than public opinion and indicate a need for further research into the effectiveness of IO self-legitimation.

4 Public opinion and IOs: an agenda for future research

Scholarship on public opinion and IOs has made significant advances over the past two decades. In this introduction, we have reviewed these advances and identified the contributions of this special issue in three core areas of research: the drivers of public opinion toward IOs, the effects of public opinion on IOs, and the influence of IOs on public opinion. In the process, we have introduced concepts, mechanisms, and typologies that are useful for understanding the dynamics of public opinion in global governance. We have also identified a number of limitations in existing scholarship and opportunities for further development. By way of conclusion, we therefore chart an agenda for future research, highlighting four promising avenues for the study of public opinion and IOs.

First, we call for more research on the *interplay between public opinion and IOs*. Existing scholarship shows that public opinion can affect IOs, and conversely, that IOs can influence public opinion. However, both of these causal relationships remain less studied than the sources of public opinion toward IOs. Moreover, we still know little about the complex interplay between public opinion and IOs. Classic questions in public opinion research about the mutual influence between public opinion and public policy (Burstein, 2003) have rarely been asked in relation to global governance. This is all the more surprising given that public opinion has become an increasingly important factor in global governance (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2018; Rauh & Parizek, 2024), while also being shaped by actors and processes in international politics (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023; Von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2024).

Related, we know little about the channels through which information about IOs reaches citizens. Studies of IO influence typically assume that effects arise as a result of communication. However, IO communication is not the only mechanism through which citizens may gain information about these organizations. Other channels are personal experiences of participation in IOs (Agné et al., 2015; Bäckstrand et al., 2021) or exposure to salient international issues in domestic debates (De Vries et al., 2021; Schlipphak et al., 2024), particularly in the news media (Chaudoin, 2023; Mikulaschek & Parizek, 2025). The complex causal pathways linking public opinion and IOs could be further disentangled in future research.

Second, future research should *unpack public opinion* by examining and comparing elites and citizens. While public opinion may be disaggregated in multiple ways, one promising line of inquiry examines the views of elites as a particularly

influential subset of the general public. Despite some efforts, mostly in the context of EU politics (Best et al., 2012; Hooghe, 2005; Olczak & Dellmuth, 2024; Persson et al., 2019; Scholte et al., 2021; Sommerer & Tallberg, 2026; Verhaegen et al., 2021), studies of elite opinion toward international cooperation are rare. There is even less research comparing citizen and elite opinion toward IOs and foreign policy more generally (Dellmuth et al., 2022; Hooghe, 2003; Kertzer, 2022; Page & Bouton, 2007). A related question pertains to the mutual influence between citizen and elite opinion (Hellström, 2008; Steenbergen et al., 2007), which remains unanswered in the global context.

Moreover, research would benefit from considering how elites and citizen peers contribute to shaping public opinion toward IOs. While a range of studies examine effects of elite communication on public opinion (De Vries & Edwards, 2009; Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023; Torcal et al., 2018), research into how citizen peers influence public attitudes toward IOs is less developed. Select studies explore peer influence on foreign policy and IO attitudes (Ecker-Ehrhardt et al., 2025a; Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017; Malet, 2022; Walter, 2021b), indicating that people listen not only to elites but also to their fellow citizens. However, it remains an open question how elite and peer influence relate to each other in shaping public opinion toward IOs.

Third, it is important to *unpack global governance* by exploring how insights from the study of public opinion toward IOs may extend to other types of global governance institutions. IOs are key pillars of global governance, but global governance also incorporates other forms of authority beyond the nation-state, including transgovernmental networks, multistakeholder initiatives, private regulatory arrangements, international norms, and multilateral treaties (Barnett et al., 2021; Büthe & Mattli, 2011; Slaughter, 2004; Zürn, 2018). Still, most research on public opinion focuses on attitudes toward IOs, possibly because these institutions are most visible to and known among citizens. However, the types of questions asked in this literature could fruitfully be extended to other forms of global governance as well. Recent examples include studies of how the institutional features of multistakeholder partnerships influence citizens' legitimacy beliefs toward such partnerships (Jongen & Scholte, 2024; Koliev & Bäckstrand, 2024) and of how elite cues shape public attitudes toward international law and agreements (Brutger & Li, 2022; Brutger & Rathbun, 2021; Dür & Schlipphak, 2021; Guisinger & Saunders, 2017; Hicks et al., 2014; Lee & Prather, 2020; Naoi & Urata, 2013; Spilker et al., 2020).

Related, research about the influence of IOs on public opinion has not considered sufficiently that IOs operate under increasing institutional complexity. Competitive multilateralism (Morse & Keohane, 2014), overlapping institutions (Haftel & Lenz, 2022), and governance complexes (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Westerwinter, 2022) equip IOs with new opportunities for influencing public attitudes, for example, by aligning their positions with those of other actors or by exploiting member state dynamics across venues. At the same time, this landscape of institutional complexity can reduce the scope for individual IOs to influence public opinion.

Fourth and finally, this field of research would benefit from a broader *comparative perspective*, including greater attention to public opinion and IOs in non-Western contexts. Like much research in international relations, the study of public opinion and IOs has been predominantly concerned with problems and dynamics in the West.

Scholarship has tended to focus on public opinion in mainly Western democratic countries – often the US, the UK, and Germany – toward a select set of major IOs, such as the EU, IMF, UN, World Bank, and WTO. One additional source of bias has likely been the extensive reliance on survey experiments, which have advantages in identifying causal effects, but come with significant costs and access demands that lead researchers to limit studies to one or a few countries. Similarly, the requirement that individuals are aware of the institutions they are polled about has contributed to the restrictive focus on high-profile, Western IOs.

However, the study of public opinion and IOs would gain extensively by expanding its comparative scope beyond western countries, as illustrated by several contributions to this special issue (Arias & Hulvey, 2025; Bulman et al., 2025; Chang et al., 2025; Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2025). Recent studies indicate that conventional foci in the literature, such as US public opinion on international issues, tend to be unrepresentative of public opinion generally (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023; Ghassim et al., 2022; but see Bassan-Nygate et al., 2024). Likely due to varying historical relations between countries and IOs, the levels and drivers of public opinion tend to vary across and within Western and non-Western contexts, underlining the importance of a comparative approach (Dellmuth et al., 2022; Ecker-Ehrhardt et al., 2024). A predominant focus on states and IOs in the West is especially problematic in view of the global power shift and the growing engagement of non-Western countries in world politics. As other states and IOs come to the fore, the study of public opinion needs to expand its empirical scope.

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