Legitimate Governance in International Politics: Towards a Relational Theory of Legitimation

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Abstract

How are governing actors in international politics legitimised? This paper argues that current approaches to the study of legitimation overly rely on "sources" of legitimacy and under-appreciate the complexities of governance in contemporary international and global politics. The paper shows that these shortcomings are rooted in the literature's substantialist meta-theory and argues that to account for these shortcomings, legitimation needs to be conceptualised instead from a relational meta-theoretical starting point. Doing so, the paper offers a relational theory of the legitimation of governing actors in international politics. It places normative expectations about governance of both rulers and the ruled centre-stage. Legitimation is described as a process of congruence-finding between these normative expectations. This process of congruence-finding might be influenced via two sets of mechanisms, relational and cognitive mechanisms, working on different levels of a governance network. The degree of congruence between the legitimation patterns of a governance provider and a governance taker will shape governance actions within the relation, with more congruence giving rise to stabler governance practices.

Keywords: legitimacy, legitimation, relationalism, International Relations, global governance, theory

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Introduction

How are governing actors in international politics legitimised? Scholarship within International Relations (IR) has shown that legitimacy matters – for a diverse set of actors ranging from states to international institutions to rebel groups. Legitimacy increases compliance with governance,[1] fosters an entity's acceptance and support,[2] and renders governance more stable and efficient.[3] In recent years, however, scholars have noted that the legitimacy of many international organisations (IOs) has been increasingly contested. Consequently, conventional accounts tell us that if such governing entities employ specific "sources of legitimacy" such as democratic procedures or technocratic expertise, they would ensure their legitimacy, and thus, stable and uncontested governance.[4]

However, when the Trump administration contested the legitimacy of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), they criticised the very idea of multi-lateral trade rather than the institution's procedures of how to administer it.[5] Going back historically, when non-aligned states met in Bandung in 1955, they sought to carve out their own conception of what legitimate international cooperation could look like, markedly different from the pillars and procedures the Liberal International Order was built on.[6] Finally, when NATO sought to establish legitimate governance in Afghanistan in the 2000s, any procedures and output NATO put forward were mediated by perceptions of foreignness and imperialism among the local Afghan population - to detrimental effect.[7]

These diverse examples on the (de-)legitimation of governing actors in international politics cannot be fully explained by reference to stable "sources of legitimacy" that exist outside of legitimation processes: a given source of legitimacy might be interpreted variably depending on an actor's background knowledge and thus have relationally different effects.[8] When dealing with multiple audiences, someone's source of legitimacy might be someone else's source of illegitimacy.[9] Indeed, preferences as to what legitimate governance entails might not be widely shared but instead be relationally located and do not go far beyond neighbourhoods, regions or states. These norms might often be at odds with the standard liberal focus on procedures and

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1. Chayes and Chayes 1998; Bukovansky 2002; Franck 1990; Hurd 1999; Tyler 2006.
2. Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015.
3. Schmelzle and Stollenwerk 2018; Clark 2007; Zürn 2018.
4. Zürn 2018; Tallberg and Zürn 2019.
5. Jan and Phansalkar 2019.
6. Wright 1995.
7. Minatti and Duyvesteyn 2020.
8. Raymond 2019, 19.
9. Billerbeck and Gippert 2017, 279.

output.[10] Moreover, given that audiences in international politics are exposed to legitimation efforts of various actors, they will continually interpret and evaluate framings and justifications and compare them against each other.

In this paper, I argue that the sources of legitimacy approach cannot fully explain these dynamics due to its meta-theoretical starting point: substantialism. Assuming fixed entities between whom inter-action occurs leads these theories to reproduce several blind spots: They privilege the governor's perspective over that of the governed by neglecting how specific sources are cognitively presented among an audience; they treat standards and beliefs as to what legitimate governance entails as static; and seem biased towards certain liberal preferences assumed to be shared among actors such as democratic procedures or distributive fairness. Consequently, the sources of legitimacy approach fails to fully account for several important aspects of the *hows* of legitimation.

To address these shortcomings, this paper seeks to expand upon existing approaches to the study of legitimation by changing its meta-theoretical foundations and offering a relational lens to consider how governance within international politics is legitimised and delegitimised. Rather than focusing on legitimacy as a variable and attribute, it concentrates on the process of legitimation and investigates how its dynamics shape outcomes related to governance. This process of legitimation is described as a trans-actionist contestation over the normative expectations about governance of a governing actor (the governance provider) and of an audience (the governance taker). I identify three heuristic categories of normative expectations relevant for legitimation, the sum of which I call *legitimation patterns*: formal and informal rules, justificatory beliefs, and modes of consent. Such patterns about what legitimate governance entails in terms of shared meanings for legitimation seekers and legitimation audiences is continuously shaped through their positioning in overlapping governance relations (both spatial and temporal), and their actions within them.

Finally, I argue that (de-)legitimation can be described as a process of *congruence-finding* where actors evaluate their governance relation, more specifically its discursive and material manifestations, to see whether their normative expectations are met. The degree of congruence between the legitimation patterns of a governance provider and a governance taker will shape governance actions within the relation, with more congruence giving rise to stabler governance practices. But legitimation patterns are not static properties but are both constituted by and constitutive of governance relations. Drawing on McAdam et al.'s conceptualisation of mechanisms within social networks, I elaborate on two kinds of mechanisms that

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10. Duyvesteyn 2017; Roy 2004.

may alter a governance relation towards greater or lesser congruence: cognitive and relational mechanisms.[11]

Theorising legitimation as a relational process of congruence-finding makes two contributions to International Relations theory. First, the paper advances current debates on how governance constellations are (de-)legitimised by offering a fine-grained model of legitimation. By opening the black box of meta-theory, the paper not only brings the study of legitimation in conversation with recent ontological debates in IR.[12] It also shows the limitations inherent to much of the existing literature and provides avenues for new pathways to the study of legitimation. Taking seriously the relationality of legitimacy, it avoids the pitfall of reproducing a ruler-centric bias, a static understanding of properties, and a reliance on liberal-biased taxonomies of legitimacy sources. Instead, it holds that actors' preferences need to be seen as dynamic and endogenous to legitimation processes. Second, by emphasising the locatedness of legitimation, the theory seeks to provide a conceptual foundation that travels better between the various kinds of governance we can find within international politics. A relational perspective thus can help scholars to better understand what causes and shapes the (de-)legitimation of governance providers in international politics by acknowledging its intricacies and foregrounding the theoretical tools to analytically capture these complexities.

This paper proceeds in four steps. First, I critically review the literature on legitimacy in international relations. Second, I make the case for going beyond the focus on "sources of legitimacy" and propose to embrace a relational perspective. Third, I theorise legitimation in relational terms. Finally, the paper discusses the theory's implications and gives concluding remarks.

Legitimacy and Legitimation in International Relations

The study of legitimacy has a long and interdisciplinary history that can generally be divided into normative and empirical approaches. The former engage in moral reasoning to establish standards of "support-worthiness", either framed in absolute terms or grounded within a specific historical context.[13] The latter focus on people's beliefs about the legitimacy of actors and institutions.[14] The starting point for the empirical study of legitimacy has been Max Weber who argued that "in no instance does domination voluntarily limit itself to the appeal to material or

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11. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001.

12. Katzenstein 2022; Jackson and Nexon 2019; McCourt 2016.

13. MacDonald and MacDonald 2020, 521; Williams 2008.

14. R. Barker 2001, 9; Certainly, this dichotomy can be complexified, see Beetham 1991, 110.

affectual or ideal motives as a basis for its continuance. In addition every such system attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy".[15] Consequently, he defined legitimacy by equating it with *Legitimitätsglaube*, the belief in the legitimacy and the "rightfulness" of an authority. In other words, an authority enjoys legitimacy if its subordinates believe it to be legitimate, and any authority will actively foster such beliefs. Weber identified three ideal-type legitimation strategies, patterns of action on which rulers can draw to legitimise themselves and their political order: legal rules, tradition and charisma.[16]

IR scholarship interested in *legitimation* – in how legitimacy becomes constructed which is what this paper concentrates on – is largely rooted in this Weberian approach. Originally scholars analysed legitimation mostly in the context of state governance.[17] Subsequently, they started to investigate legitimation beyond the state, most importantly in relation to international organisations[18] and supranational organisations such as the European Union (EU).[19] Equally, scholars of conflict have scrutinised how beliefs and perceptions of legitimacy are fostered by sub-state actors like rebel groups.[20] Doing so, this literature frequently relies on models of "sources of legitimacy" (SOL).

The SOL approach most widely used to study the legitimation of governing actors has been to investigate the material-institutional set-up of a given governing actor and to study its effects on the legitimacy beliefs of a given audience.[21] Most commonly, scholars differentiate between procedural legitimacy and output legitimacy, arguing that it is either the effective provision of governance services or the fair and equal procedures behind governance decisions that give rise to perceptions of legitimacy.[22] Research has analysed how state services can foster a state's legitimacy, not least in contexts of weak or fragile statehood;[23] how functional characteristics of certain IOs correlate with perceptions of appropriateness among NGO employees;[24] or how service provision by IOs has a positive impact on their legitimacy.[25]

Going beyond this material-institutionalist focus, another group of scholars has anal-

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15. Weber 1978, 213; see also Popitz 1992.

16. Breuer 2000, 10.

17. Lipset 1981; Hennis 1976; R. S. Barker 1990; Beetham 1991; Gilley 2009.

18. Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Bernstein 2011; Hurd 1999; Keohane 2006; Zürn 2018; Tallberg and Zürn 2019.

19. Scharpf 1999; Schmidt 2013; Beetham and Lord 1998; McNamara 2015.

20. Mampilly 2015; Schlichte and Schneckener 2015.

21. Nielson, Hyde and Kelley 2019; Zürn 2004; Whalan 2013; Schmidt 2013; Cronin and Hurd 2008.

22. Steffek 2007; Scharpf 1999; Tallberg and Zürn 2019; Tyler 2006; Gippert 2016.

23. Milliken and Krause 2002; Mcloughlin 2015.

24. Nielson, Hyde and Kelley 2019.

25. Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015.

ysed the symbolic and discursive "sources of legitimacy", focusing on what governing actors
say, rather than what they *are* and how these discursive structures achieve resonance with
a given audience. This literature investigates the legitimation strategies of governing actors
in international politics to study how these actors aim to create feelings of obligation and
appropriateness.[26] Research has detailed various ways in which governing institutions can le-
gitimise themselves, focusing on legitimation narratives or discursive argumentations about
scope, principles and procedures.[27] In the case of non-state actors such as rebel groups, schol-
ars investigated the role of ideology, symbolism and ideation as elements of legitimation next
to utilitarian considerations.[28]

Beyond "Sources of Legitimacy"

The SOL approaches introduced in the previous section have been able to significantly con-
tribute to our understanding of the legitimation of governing actors in international politics.
They have helped us to better conceptualise global governance, dynamics of support and com-
pliance, and even institutional change.

By and large, these SOL approaches conceive of legitimacy as produced by the *inter-
action* of two independent actors: the legitimacy-seeker, employing its sources of legitimacy; and
the legitimacy-giver, evaluating them. Hence, the SOL approach is rooted in a substantialist
ontology which assumes entities - such as IOs or specific audiences - to be independently existing
actors and relevant social action - such as the legitimation of an IO - as taking place *among*
entities.[29] Notably, this substantialist starting point has a long tradition within the research
complex of power, compliance and legitimacy. Indeed, already Robert Dahl pointed out that
power "is a relation *among* people"[30] and other scholars partaking in the "faces of power" debate
have adopted similar stances.[31] With regards to legitimacy, sociologist Rodney Barker noted
that legitimacy "can be presented as a relationship between rulers and subjects".[32]

Such a substantialist meta-theory can be contrasted with a relational one which has
become increasingly prominent within the discipline of International Relations.[33] A relational

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26. Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Gronau and Schmidtke 2016; Harman 2016.
27. Zürn 2018, ch. 3; Steffek 2003; Binder and Heupel 2015.
28. Schlichte and Schneckener 2015.
29. Selg 2016.
30. Dahl 1957, 203.
31. Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lukes 1974.
32. R. S. Barker 1990, 27; These insights have also been taken up by scholars such as Schoon, Joosse
and Milward 2020.
33. Jackson and Nexon 2019; McCourt 2016; Selg 2016.

meta-theory focuses on *trans-actions* and takes not social structures nor actors but social interaction as its central unit of analysis.[34] Hence, while substantialist approaches maintain that "the ontological primitives of analysis are 'things' or entities", relationalism sees relations as ontologically prior to substances and focuses on the "configurations of ties – recurrent socio-cultural interaction – between social aggregates of various sorts and their component parts as the building blocks of social analysis".[35] A relational perspective does not focus on legitimacy as an attribute of a given actor or the beliefs of a given population, but rather on legitimation as a continuous process stemming from and shaping *a governance relation*.[36] In other words, a governing actor can never be "legitimate" *per se* and legitimation is an ever-shifting, dynamic configuration emerging from the trans-actions of actors within governance relations.

In the remainder of this section, I want to argue that by rooting itself in a substantialist meta-theory, the SOL literature perpetuates three problematic analytical assumptions about the process of legitimation within international politics: a ruler-centric bias, a static understanding of properties, and a reliance on pre-specified sources of legitimacy. I show that that these shortcomings are intrinsic to the meta-theoretical assumptions of the SOL approach and a meta-theoretical shift towards relationalism is necessary to address each of these conceptual shortcomings.

To illustrate these shortcomings, let us discuss in greater detail one prominent example within the SOL literature. Tallberg and Zürn have recently put forward a sophisticated model combining the essentialist and discursive SOL approach.[37] The authors devise a causal chain of legitimation: whenever an IO is conferred authority, legitimation becomes relevant. At that point, the manifestations of the institutional characteristics of the IO, specifically its procedures and its performance, translate into legitimacy beliefs of its audiences which can range from states, to I(N)GOs to citizens. This direct mechanism is mediated by legitimation and delegitimation attempts by a variety of actors which – through framing the IO's material features positively or negatively – continually (re)shape and alter the audience's legitimacy beliefs. In other words, an IO will be legitimate where its procedures and performance "conform to established procedural and performance standards", and few actors – if any – contest this publicly.[38]

With this framework, the authors provide an insightful theory of legitimation. However,

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34. See also Goddard 2020, 2006.

35. Jackson and Nexon 1999, 291; see also Tilly 1998, 398.

36. On this point, see P. T. Jackson 2006.

37. Tallberg and Zürn 2019.

38. Ibid., 592.

as much of the SOL approach, the model brings with it three blind spots. I will tackle each in turn, showing its roots in a substantialist meta-theory before arguing how a relational approach can mitigate the blind spot.

Ruler-centric Bias

First, Tallberg and Zürn's model of legitimation gives analytical primacy to the governing actor by investigating legitimacy sources independently of an audience's cognition. In their model, IOs are theorised to utilise material and ideational "sources" to be bestowed with legitimacy by an audience. This "ruler-centrism" shifts the focus away from people's beliefs towards the creation and dissemination of these beliefs.[39] The model focuses more on institutional characteristics and how other actors discursively frame these objective characteristics, than on investigating the cognitive representation of these characteristics among an audience.[40]

In other words, SOL models expect that legitimacy sources such as democratic procedures matter independently of how these procedures are cognitively perceived among an audience and what meaning they attribute to it. This approach is rooted in a substantialist logic where the analytical focus is on attributes of actors rather than on how the they matter within a relation.[41] The SOL approach assumes that legitimacy sources – as attributes of governing actors – enjoy meaning in themselves rather than acquiring it through the relation between two actors. Hence, while the SOL approach allows us to investigate how institutional characteristics and their framing matter for legitimation (an IO fighting for democracy), it cannot account for how the meaning of such sources is relationally different (what does democracy mean within a given relation and what moral value is attached to it).[42] Thus, much of the theoretical persuasiveness of a model that ultimately seeks to say something *about audiences* is hampered by its analytical focus on governing actors.

In contrast, from the relational approach follows that legitimation is ultimately *transactional*. That is to say "the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction."[43] In other words, both material and discursive characteristics of any governing entity (such as legitimacy sources) have little meaning within themselves without scrutinising how

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39. Merquior 1980, 133; for a longer discussion of this point in the context of statebuilding, see Lemay-Hébert 2013.

40. See Lenz and Viola 2017, 949 for a similar discussion.

41. Emirbayer 1997, 289.

42. On the intricacies of the term democracy across languages and cultures, see Schaffer 2014.

43. Emirbayer 1997, 287.

these characteristics are situated within the relation, how their meaning is shaped by the social arrangement between governors and governed, and how they are perceived by the audience under study. Instead of giving analytical primacy to the governing actor, relationalism acknowledges that legitimation ultimately builds on governance relations and the social action by both the rulers and the ruled. It takes the relation as unit of analysis and investigate how dimensions of legitimation gain meaning and significance within it.

Static Properties

Second, Tallberg and Zürn, and with them the SOL approach, treat actors' expectations as static, neglecting the endogenous effects of governance and legitimation. In its core, the SOL approach looks at the interaction between the static characteristics of a governing entity and the audience's preferences. The approach treats legitimacy as an characteristic which a governing actor either possesses or not, attributed to the actor by a given audience if the "right" sources are utilised. It is an essentialist conception of legitimation which assumes "that the component elements of the equation – legitimacy, the organization, the social environment – are stable, universal and enduring properties".[44]

This assumes that while an audience's assessment of the legitimacy of a governing entity is influenced by the framing of legitimation claims, their own moral compass informing this evaluation remains stable. However, given that these discursive contestations are purposed to stir thinking or emotions, such an assumption seems unrealistic. Indeed, if we think about the continuous efforts of the European Union to portray itself as a legitimate governance provider over decades, it is plausible to assume that this will indeed change constituents' perceptions about moral standards of supranational governance.[45]

The idea of static preferences is premised on a substantialist worldview which considers relations as functions of actors' attributes (or variables) but the actors as such remain unchanged throughout an interaction. In that sense, legitimation stems from the interaction of the legitimacy sources of an governing actor, on the one hand, and the audience's priors on the other, both of which, however, remain unchanged throughout the process of legitimation. While the SOL approach allows to observe change of legitimacy beliefs (an audience considers an IO more legimate due to its democratic procedures), a more fundamental change in preferences (how an audience comes to value democratic over authoritarian norms) is fully exogenous to

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44. Suddaby, Bitektine and Haack 2017, 458.

45. On this point, see McNamara 2015, who discusses how the EU becomes naturalised as authority through a process of internalisation.

its theorising.

Conversely, a relational approach to legitimation emphasises change and continuous contestation over configurations of legitimation. If we assume that legitimation is a process shaping governance actors while at the same time being shaped by them, it becomes clear that actors' preferences cannot be seen as independent and static, but as dynamic and endogenous to legitimation processes. In this sense, actors of legitimation themselves are continually shaped through the governance relations they are embedded in, changing their preferences and expectations.[46]

Moreover, a relational lens makes apparent that legitimation must be understood as taking place within a *network* of governance relations. While the SOL approach considers a given actor's legitimation efforts are independent from other governing actors, relationalism takes issue with assuming a single relation to exist in isolation. For example, within Europe, governance relations might be manifold, constituting a population as legitimation audience towards regional authorities, the federal state as well as the European Union. Governance is almost always contested between these different governing actors which advance contesting legitimation claims. It is this presence of alternative governance models that make questions of legitimacy come to the fore in the first place.[47] However, a relational lens analysis of the legitimation of EU governance towards a national population must necessarily also take into account the legitimation of this population's state. In other words, actors are constituted through networks of relations, making their roles and expectations within governance relations dependent on their situating and positioning within networks of governance.

It follows, then, that a legitimation audience's preferences are not prior to but instead premised on governance relations and a process of legitimation. We cannot think of a state as having certain independent preferences (or priors) with regards to legitimate governance, but need instead to consider that such preferences are logically preceded by relations and governance networks more broadly, which give meaning to actors and their preferences. For example, a state becomes constituted as a legitimation audience only by engaging in other processes (such as signing an international treaty with an IO). Its preferences, consequently, cannot be described independently of this relation but only through it.

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46. Bourdieu 1992, 138 makes a related point when discussing the naturalisation and legitimation of social difference.

47. On that point, see Beetham 1991, 62; Lenz and Viola 2017, 950; Schoon, Joosse and Milward 2020.

Pre-specified Sources

Third, the authors' model – and the SOL approach more broadly – is marked by a cultural and ideological predisposition in that they assume that every audience will look solely at an IO's procedures and performance to evaluate its legitimacy. Hooghe et al. argue that – for the example of Western states – for critics from the left, the assumption that procedures and performance matter might hold: "Left-wing" audiences might disagree with the concrete manifestations of IOs, its procedures and performance, but not fundamentally with the IO itself. "Right-wing" audiences, on the other hand, tend to disagree with IOs regardless of its more specific characteristics.[48] The latter case, however, cannot be properly depicted by a theoretical reliance on sources of legitimacy.

In that sense, the model exhibits an implicit liberal bias in the model that takes certain preferences for granted,[49] failing to appreciate the locatedness and audience-dependency of legitimation. Given the diverse political perspectives, interests and socialisation backgrounds possible, this hardly tends to be a given – even more so since the authors mention that audiences can be states, citizens or other IOs. Tallberg and Zürn acknowledge that it is audience-dependent which specific kind of procedures matter. But they still assume that audiences necessarily value procedures.[50]

This final blind spot is equally premised on the SOL's meta-theoretical commitment. In substantialist analysis, relevant social action takes place *among* substances and "it is the variable attributes themselves that 'act'"[51] rather than the substances as such: legitimacy sources interact with audience preferences rather than the actors as such. This assumption allows scholars to define attributes which matter for a given model independently of context, and investigating their significance detached from their relations with other elements. Thus, a substantialist model of legitimation fails to account for how diverse manifestations and implications of legitimation processes are across various governance relations.

In contrast, a relational view, as written above, asks scholars to embrace the locatedness of meaning within different relations. Suchs a view makes clear that we cannot pre-define *what*

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48. Hooghe, Lenz and Marks 2019.

49. Hurd 2019.

50. In line with the SOL approach, the authors consider the conferral of authority (which gives rise to processes of legitimation in the first place) to be outside of the legitimacy relation between governing actor and audience when they argue that "the institutional authority of an IO is a function of delegation of authority from member states to an IO and pooling of authority in an IO through collective decision making", see Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 591.

51. Emirbayer 1997, 286.

matters for legitimation processes in terms of sources. With each relation being uniquely located and actors dependent on the various relations they are embedded in, a listing of sources can never do justice to the idiosyncrasies of governance relations in international politics. Instead, what matters for legitimation processes must ultimately dependent on governance relations and their positioning within networks of governance.

To sum up this review, the study of legitimation in international politics has overly focused – both theoretically and empirically – on "sources of legitimacy". Doing so, the literature fails to account for the intricacies of governance in international politics by privileging the ruler's perspective, treating preferences as static and reproducing liberal-biased models of legitimation. Notably, I do not take issue with Tallberg and Zürn's article specifically. Rather, I have argued that the substantialist meta-theory undergirding the SOL approach and their model contributes to several blind spots, both meta-theoretically and theoretically. Finally, I have shown that adopting a relational lens on legitimation might help to alleviate these shortcomings and advance the study of legitimation beyond the SOL approach. Consequently, I argue that the study of legitimation as spearheaded by the SOL approach could be meaningfully extended by premising it on a relational meta-theory in order to account for the complexities of governance in international politics.

A Relational Theory of Legitimation of Governance

In this section, I seek to show what a meta-theoretical shift to relationalism entails with regards to a theory of legitimation. I put forward a conceptualisation of how legitimation in international politics works, which goes beyond existing SOL approaches by embracing a relational ontology which allows us to more comprehensively account for the unique dynamics of the contested, fluid and poly-centric environment of international politics. In other words, I argue that the SOL approach and its models need not be discarded but rather integrated into a relational approach to legitimation to broaden its scope and increase its analytical vigour. In the following, I seek to outline what such a shift would entail.

This theory does not centre on legitimacy as a substantive quality of a set of relations but instead on the process of legitimation. Hence, for the remainder of the paper, I leave legitimacy as a noun behind and focus on legitimation as a verb: a configuration of processes within governance relations that signify the relation as rightful or appropriate (or wrongful and inappropriate) for involved actors in a given moment in time and thus shape governance practices. Such processes are inherently dynamics as actors within governance relations con-

tinuously negotiate over what is rightful.

I advance my conceptualisation in five steps. First, I set the theory's scope and its actors. Second, I introduce the heuristic structure of legitimation patterns to the study of legitimation. Third, I conceptualise the process of legitimation in a context of complex and multi-layered governance. Finally, give an overview of various mechanisms that might impact the (de-)legitimation of relations.

The Scope of Legitimate Governance

In international politics, a plethora of parallel governance relations exists involving a multitude of actors: most importantly states and their governments; populations; international organisations, NGOs, and firms; but also armed actors such as insurgents. Through these governance relations, these entities are in various ways also involved in processes of legitimation.[52] This supposes legitimation to be a function of a governance relation. Governance relations might be defined as "institutionalized modes of social coordination to produce and implement collectively binding rules or to provide collective goods".[53] They can be understood as emerging through trans-actions of governing, subjugating and related practices.

Governance relations, then, will typically start boundary processes in which certain sets of relations become constituted as actors and differentiated into governance providers and governance takers, or rulers and ruled.[54] It is exactly from this boundary process within a governance relationship that the need for legitimation arises. For legitimation to become a relevant process, however, a governance relation must be built on notions that the subordinates *matter* for the relation. Such notions include claims of representation and popular sovereignty but also of patriarchal salvation or education. In purely coercive environments, where rulers are interested solely in extraction or survival and do not engage with the ruled, legitimation processes will hardly occur. For example, governance relations of slavery or early modern capitalism were purely coercive governance relations, built on extreme status differences and the assumption that the subordinates themselves do not play any role for the relation. This is not to say that rulers in such contexts might not develop legitimation narratives towards other audiences. The relation in question, however, between masters and slaves or bosses and

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52. Billerbeck and Gippert 2017, 275; Risse and Stollenwerk 2018, 408; Raymond and DeNardis 2015, 583; Keck and Sikkink 1998.

53. Risse and Stollenwerk 2018, 406.

54. Jackson and Nexon 1999, 311.

"labour hands", cannot be one of legitimation.[55] At the same time, this scope condition makes most authoritarian governance relations subject to a legitimation process as they almost always feature some notion that the governed matter for the relation, be it through elections or popular mobilisations. Notably, such notions or acts need not play any role in sustaining power-holders. Simply by acknowledging that subordinates are in some way relevant for the governance relation, power-holders go beyond purely coercive rule, raising the need of its legitimation on both sides.

Given the diversity of governance relations in international politics, it makes little sense to freeze who is or is not an actor of legitimation *a priori*. Instead, agency of entities can be conceived as fundamentally dependent on their participation and position in social relationships of governance. Only through their participation in a governance relation do they become constituted as actors of legitimation whose action bears meaning for the relation as such. For example, the German state can be considered as a governing legitimation seeker in its relation to its population, but acts as a legitimation audience with regards to supra-national institutions such as the European Union. The German population is constituted as a legitimation audience through interacting in a governance relation with its state; towards an inter-governmental institution its state is a member of such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), it might not be. Finally, the European Union is not only constituted as a governance provider towards both the German state and its population, but also as an audience towards other IOs it is subordinated to such as the WTO.

Expectations and Legitimation Patterns

I have defined legitimation as a configuration of processes within governance relations that provide meaning through which these relations are seen as appropriate. In other words, I argue that at the heart of legitimation processes lies a continuous contestation over patterns of meaning and normative expectations about what legitimate governance entails. Hence, the next question is how such expectations become relevant for a governance relation.

I conceptualise normative expectations of what a legitimate governance relationship should look like as *legitimation patterns*. They can be understood to form a kind of "background knowledge" or "procedural rules" which help actors to make sense of governance.[56] Notably, such patterns will often not be unequivocally shared among all actors in a governance relation, giving rise to processes of legitimation in the first place. Indeed, the relative positioning of governance relations and more importantly, the way they might overlap can lead to differ-

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55. For a further discussion on this, see Beetham 1991, 30–32.
56. See Adler and Pouliot 2011, 7; and Raymond 2019.

ences in the constitution of actors' normative expectations. "Ideas thus become means, media, and products of social interchange", between relations as well as the actors within them.[57] In other words, what expectations legitimation seekers and legitimation audiences have towards legitimate governance is continuously shaped by their positioning in overlapping governance relations (both spatial and temporal), and their actions within them.

Such a conceptualisation moves away from the SOL approach's focus on actors' beliefs about legitimate governance as existing prior to and independent of specific governance relations. Instead, it considers governance relations as prior to expectations.

These considerations helps us to address two empirical phenomena discussed in the literature on legitimation in international politics. First, scholars have shown the existence of a "knowledge gap" of citizens as their awareness and knowledge about IOs varies along socio-economic status and cosmopolitan identities.[58] It is thus unrealistic to assume that any given audience has well-developed expectations towards a given governance relation. Rather, actors are influenced through the governance relations they experience and have experienced, and interpret a given governance relation through such a prism. This, in turn, means that expectations of what legitimate governance entails are contingent on other governance relations. For example, a population is shaped as a legitimation audience through the various governance relations it is embedded in: with a state, IOs and regional governments. Each of these relations will contribute to shaping the audience's expectations towards a given relation. In that way, legitimation patterns act as "scripts that diffuse through networks and otherwise embed in the ongoing transactions that constitute social and political life."[59] In case of a "knowledge gap", it is thus reasonable to assume the diffusion of patterns to new governance relations.

Second, scholars have shown that audiences' evaluations of international organisations are frequently dependent not on well-founded beliefs held towards a given governance relation but rather on general trust in political institutions or trust in a state is transposed to other governance institutions through a kind of "domestic analogy".[60] A relational approach to legitimation patterns makes such dynamics heart and centre of its approach by accepting the premise that actors are constituted as legitimation audiences (or legitimation seekers) through various governance transactions that shape them and their expectations. This view makes clear that expectations are neither static nor independent but endogenous to legitimation processes and

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57. Tilly 2003, 6.
58. Dellmuth 2016.
59. Nexon 2009, 45.
60. Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015; Armingeon and Ceka 2014.

"their participation in ongoing processes of social interaction."[61] For example, within domestic governance relations of the People's Republic of China legitimation patterns might develop, which attribute little significance to the "democratic deficit" of a new international institution, while such a deficit might be a major concern within a Western European country where actors experience different sets of governance relations and thus are constituted with different expectations.

I draw on political theorist David Beetham to develop a heuristic device to analyse which kinds of norms bear relevance for the legitimation patterns of governance relations in international politics. One of the most influential theorists of legitimation, Beetham has proposed a threefold model of legitimacy, stemming from the interplay of rules, justificatory beliefs and behavioural consent.[62] First, legality describes the requirement that any power must be acquired and exercised according to pre-existing rules that define and contain the power relation.[63] Second, justifiability describes the need for these rules to be justifiable in the sense that they are be believed to enjoy qualities justifying subordination to them. On the one hand, the source from which the rules are derived must be seen as authoritative, while, on the other, the content of the rules must specify what the "proper ends and standards of government" are and how they benefit the governance takers.[64] Third, consent describes the need for a "demonstrable expression of consent on the part of the subordinate".[65] Whenever actors engage in public actions that demonstrate compliance with a power relationship, they legitimise it. Whose and what mode of consent matters within a given context, Beetham adds, is culturally defined.

I argue that this threefold structure serves as a useful heuristic starting point to analyse legitimation patterns, namely as the agreed-upon rules, justifications and modes of consent that signify legitimate governance. Let me be clear in saying that I do not hold that legitimation patterns are necessarily structured that way but that such an heuristic framework helps us to make sense of patterns of meanings with regards to legitimate governance.[66]

To illustrate the empirical implications of this threefold heuristic structure to analyse normative expectations about legitimate governance, let us briefly return to the example of Germany and the European Union in the most general terms and sketch a snapshot of a

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61. Nexon 2009, 25.

62. Beetham 1991.

63. Ibid., 16.

64. Beetham and Lord 1998, 3.

65. Beetham 1991, 18.

66. Such an analysis might require to reify expectations of actors *for the sake of analysis* but does not preclude the theoretical assumption that they are always in flux and indeed continually shaped through the network of governance relations.

governance network between the European Union, the German state and a part of the German population supporting and voting for the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD).[67] In this network of governance relations, the EU is arguably constituted as governance provider both towards the German State and the German population, the German state as governance taker towards the EU and as governance provider towards its population; and finally the AfD supporters are constituted as governance takers.

The German state, very much embedded in the notion of the liberal state, could be analysed as interpreting its governance relations along several expectations: In terms of rules, Germany as an actor of legitimation considers constitutional rule of law rightful; in terms of justifications, Germany grounds its authority in popular sovereignty, and the protection of individual rights; in terms of modes of consent, the German state attributes above all meaning to popular elections.[68] In contrast, while the European Union can be said to ground their rules on supra-national rule of law, its justifications differ: It builds its authority on technocratic expertise next to popular sovereignty, and the common good of its governance is welfare maximisation rather than rights protection. As a mode of consent, the European Union builds on deliberation among states.[69] Finally, let us contrast those two governance providers with supporters of the right-wing party AfD. Arguably, this part of the German population holds normative expectations towards governance that more or less mirror those of the institutionalised German state – with one significant difference. The former arguably has a markedly different conception of who "the people" relevant for justification of popular sovereignty and for consent via popular elections are, a more exclusive notion than generally found on a state level.[70] I illustrate this conceptualisation in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

Notably, this empirical snapshot is meant as a simplified illustration of the heuristic structure of legitimation patterns. It reifies both actors and expectations to some extent to allow for analytical clarity. Nevertheless, the examples show that adopting this heuristic device to study legitimation has two crucial advantages. First, while the threefold structure of legitimation patterns identifies categories of expectations, it remains theoretically open to the precise empirical manifestations of expectations about governance. As Table 1 illustrates, what

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67. For this illustration, I draw on the analysis of the legitimacy of the European Union by Beetham and Lord 1998.

68. Ibid., 8.

69. Ibid., 16.

70. Ayerbe Linares 2019, 287.

legitimate governance means for actors embedded in governance relations might differ both structurally (between the EU and Germany) or substantively (between the German state and the AFD movement). This approach allows to capture the locatedness of legitimation and its embeddedness in spatio-temporal relations (thus giving rise to historically and culturally bound patterns of actors), instead of reproducing liberal taxonomies of legitimacy sources. Second, the heuristic structure conceptualises both material and symbolic elements of governance in terms of located expectations, which helps to resolve the contradiction that is often found in scholarship of "performance legitimacy" or "output legitimacy".[71] These studies consider material benefits not only as "independent ingredients" of political legitimacy[72] but also as necessarily giving rise to legitimating beliefs. However, this must not necessarily apply as Roy argues for the case of Afghanistan: Service provision in the country has not necessarily been a primary expectation toward the state among rural civilian communities as, historically, regional and local authorities have guaranteed most service provision.[73] By conceptualising material benefits of a governance relation as only meaningful for legitimation through actors' expectations, as one possible justification of common interest, the extent to which material benefits matter is seen as contingent on the governance relation in question.

Legitimation as Congruence-Finding

After having conceptualised legitimation patterns, we need to consider how such patterns become shared within a governance relation. I argue that legitimation should be understood as a process of "congruence-finding": As governance providers and governance takers engage in a governance relationship, both actors evaluate their governance relation, more specifically its discursive and material manifestations, to see whether their normative expectations are met. Analytically speaking, a legitimation process can be conceptualised as a search for congruence of shared meaning between a governance provider and a governance taker – processes of establishing, finding, and negotiating congruence for each of the three elements of legitimation patterns. Such processes might occur explicitly (the discursive justification of rule by a ruler, public protest by the ruled) or implicitly (engagement with everyday practices of governance).

Notably, empirical legitimation processes do not necessarily play out consensually in a good-willing public sphere but rather, congruence-finding is a dynamic process of dispute and

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71. Møller 2020; Scharpf 1999; Schlichte and Schneckener 2015.
72. MacDonald 2018, 402.
73. Roy 2004, 173–74.

contestation which in turn shapes legitimation patterns.[74] Neither should congruence-finding be understood as a one-way street towards legitimate governance. Processes of congruence-finding might end in no consensus on shared meaning with legitimation patterns showing little overlap, and thus, the governance relation will be *de*-legitimised. What is more, actors might actively seek to undermine congruence or emphasise divergence, resulting in the (further) delegitimation of a governance relation.

Conceptualising legitimation as a process of congruence-finding has two important implications. First, it allows us to take the *relationality of legitimation* seriously: instead of conceiving of legitimacy as belonging to an actor, the approach focuses on legitimation as emerging from a relation between a governance provider and governance taker. Hence, a governing actor cannot be legitimate *per se*; rather, it is through the trans-actions in a governance relation that congruence or divergence is found and a relation between a governing actor and an audience becomes interpreted as legitimate in a given moment in time, which in turn might influence the stability and levels of support of this relation.

Second, it follows that *legitimation is multidimensional* and can only ever be assessed in degrees. Legitimation patterns are a diverse set of norms which can hardly ever be fully matched by all actors in a governance relation, particularly not over longer periods of time. Most governance relations experience deviations from established rules and there are always those who do not accept a given justification or way of consenting to a governance relation. Moreover, the heuristic structure of legitimation patterns and the three elements of rules, justifications and modes of consent will have different implication for legitimation. Rules are the fundamental structure on which any governance relation is built and as such, deviations of rules will have the largest bearing on congruence. Justifications serve to defend these rules, and deviations thereof will lead to a legitimation deficit, undermining congruence to a substantial but lesser degree. Finally, modes of consent delineate ways of confirming the rules and justifications. Deviations regarding modes of consent have the least bearing on congruence as they only describe how to participate in a governance relation but not the substance of the governance itself.

A given governance relation can show more or less congruence within each of the three elements of the legitimation patterns. For example, one governance relation might show more congruence with regards to its justifications, while another one involving the same audience might show more congruence with regards to rules. These degrees can be analytically subsumed into a general degree of legitimation, although congruence regarding rules, justifications and modes of consent will matter here to a descending extent. This in turn allows us to compare a

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74. Wiener 2014; Sandholtz 2008.

governance relation over time or to other governance relations with regards to each dimension of the legitimation patterns and as a whole.

Returning to our example of Germany and the European Union, we see now how AfD voters, the German state and the EU – through the various material and discursive transactions that make up their governance relations – might compare and contrast each other's normative expectations. Given that the legitimation patterns of both the German State and AFD voters show overlap in terms of rules, the relation cannot be considered illegitimate – however, it will show a legitimation deficit due to the substantively different conception of "the people". At the same time, taking the secondary evidence presented in Table 1, the German state might have a greater degree of congruence with AFD voters than the European Union: a justification of authority through popular sovereignty alone will overlap more than when standing next to technocratic expertise. These degrees of congruence might in turn shape actions within each of the governance relations.

To draw on an example in a very different context of governance, consider the US-Taliban conflict in rural Afghanistan: while the United States sought to justify their governance through notions of popular sovereignty, the Taliban emphasised religious obedience to Islam. Arguably, the Taliban's strict interpretation of Islam was as much an import to rural Afghanistan as was the liberal notion of popular sovereignty.[75] However, the latter's success not only stemmed from their attempts early on to respond to local needs, but communities throughout the country were able to negotiate with the Taliban on various governance policies.[76] Within the conservative and religious rural population, the United States' justifications deviated significantly more from local expectations than the Taliban's (partially) adaptive governance relations of the Taliban, fostering local forms of support.

Finally, let me develop in greater detail one of the most fundamental characteristics of international politics: the parallelity and contestation of governance relations, leading to complex governance networks with multiple layers and multiple stakeholders.[77] This raises the question of how to conceptualise the legitimation of governance within such networks of governance relations.

The multi-layeredness of governance in international politics means that any governance relation will be entangled with other such governance relations, and that these in turn shape the relation and the actors within it. Such a conceptualisation means that legitimation can only

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75. For an extended discussion of this example, see Minatti and Duyvesteyn 2020.

76. A. Jackson 2018, 26.

77. Raustiala and Victor 2004; Raymond and DeNardis 2015.

be meaningfully grasped through the actors' positioning in a network of governance relation and when also taking into account other governance relations. What expectations legitimation seekers and legitimation audiences have towards legitimate governance is continuously re-shaped through on their positioning in overlapping governance relations, and their actions within them.

Conceptualising legitimation as congruence-finding allows theorising legitimation beyond all-or-nothing considerations. On the one hand, we might observe zero-sum games of legitimation between different governance relations, where the more congruence the legitimation patterns of a governance provider and a governance taker show relative to other governance providers, the more legitimate their relation is. On the other hand, we might also see positive-sum games of legitimation as one governance relation shapes an actor in a way where they will see greater congruence with another governance relation as well, for example through a domestic analogy as described above. A graph of the complete relational theoretical framework is depicted in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

Mechanisms of Congruence-Finding

As I have argued before, legitimation patterns are dynamic and subject to change. So how might governance relations be shaped towards greater or lesser congruence? To conceptualise mechanisms influencing legitimation through congruence-finding, we can usefully draw on McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly's differentiation between cognitive and relational mechanisms. While the literature on mechanisms has made notable advances in more recent years,[78] their insights are useful to a relational theory of legitimation as they see mechanisms specifically as events set within and changing a social network. As such, they define mechanisms as "a delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations."[79]

First, cognitive mechanisms describe forces that impact governance relations from within a given relation. Both governance providers and governance takers shape the governance relationship and their legitimation patterns through such cognitive mechanisms, influencing the process of congruence-finding.

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78. See for example Hedström and Ylikoski 2010; Gerring 2008.

79. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001, 24-26. Notably, the authors devise a third type of mechanism, environmental mechanisms, which they understand as external, material forces affecting social life, such as resource availability. While such mechanisms could be devised for the purpose of legitimation as well, this paper will focus on social mechanisms rather than material ones.

Following the discussion above, we can conceptualise a governance relation as, in part, a communicative process of advancing claims on how to interpret the relation, and of exchanging arguments and information where providers and takers seek to convince each other of their viewpoint.[80] Consequently, we can derive a number of mechanisms relevant to this study, which I can only mention in passing here. For example, scholars have proposed the cognitive mechanism of (principled) *persuasion*.[81] An actor may claim that their legitimation pattern or elements thereof are consistent with an audience's pattern, and thus their governance should be accepted as rightful. Actors may decide that the persuader's claim bears more merit than their own (approaching the Habermasian ideal of open deliberation) or act out of political and strategic concerns. Attempts at persuasion can be manyfold: Thinking back to our example of the EU and Germany, McNamara details how the EU as a governance provider, through employing symbols and practices, seeks to naturalise itself, eventually resulting in the persuasion of governance takers, or in her words "taking-for-grantedness", of EU authority.[82] Consequently, legitimation patterns can become more aligned through persuasion.

However, we might also consider a mechanism of *rethorical coercion* where actors are pressured into certain non-preferred stances through limited "wiggle room" in the ways they could justify and frame their actual preferences.[83] Such rhetorical coercion might consequently alter congruence between actors embedded in a governance relation as actors start to acquiesce to or even approve of certain interpretations of governance relations on an intersubjective level regardless of subjective motives. For example, the EU's discursive strategies of employing state-like symbols might result in ensuring that actors accustomed to state governance but not supranational governance might find themselves with limited space to justify their rejection of EU governance with regards to this dimension.

Through another cognitive mechanism of *social learning*, an governance provider might itself change its legitimation pattern:[84] Consider the US/NATO campaign in Afghanistan, in which the US initially based its governance on heavily Western-centric norms, only to gradually learn about local norms and adapt its governance approach to some extent.[85]

Second, relational mechanisms "alter connections among people, groups, and interper-

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80. Raymond 2019; Wiener 2014.

81. Goddard 2020, 85; see also Risse 2000, 9.

82. McNamara 2015.

83. Krebs and Jackson 2007.

84. Johnston 2008.

85. Minatti and Duyvesteyn 2020.

sonal networks".[86] As such, these are mechanisms where the relation between one governance provider and taker is changed by altering how these actors are positioned in the network and are embedded in other governance relations. Most crucially, here, we need to consider the relational mechanism of *governance expansion*, where new governance relations are created, bearing effects on the existing ones as well. Actors become confronted with new interpretative frames, impacting their normative expectations both towards this new but also existing governance relations. Consider the European Union's Eastern Enlargement, in which the EU engaged in new governance relations with post-Soviet states and their populations. On the one hand, governance expansion increases the space for governance takers to compare between governance providers and opens up the possibility of viable alternatives. Thus, a population's engagement in a new governance relation to the EU might significantly alter its relative congruence with its state, due to the fact that alternative ways of congruence become tangible. On the other hand, governance expansion might lead the provider to adapt to new governance relations, altering its engagement or position within already established ones. As Seidelmeier argues, the Eastern enlargement produced a new wave of codifications of liberal values such as democracy and human rights, impacting both established and new members alike.[87]

Another possible relational mechanism is *actor change*. As I have argued above, actors such as governance providers and takers need to be understood as bounded sets of relations that become constituted as actors through a governance relation. Consequently, if such underlying relations change, actors of legitimation might change as well. On the level of a state's population, we might think of migration or displacement which alter the set of relation constituting an actor and might lead to changes in an actors' legitimation pattern through new influences and cultural adaptations.[88] Equally, governance providers might experience such actor change. Consider the case of the European Union, where the institution as a governance provider towards the German population might be significantly changed through the external dynamic of the member states signing a new treaty, such as the strengthening of the European Parliament.

Congruence-finding might also be influenced through the relational mechanism of *script diffusion*.[89] Through changes in governance networks, new scripts of what legitimation might entail can become available and significant to actors within a governance relation. New script might very well emerge outside of a given governance relation, but consequently diffuse across a governance network. Doing so, they change actor's relative positioning by opening up possibili-

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86. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001, 26.

87. Seidelmeier 2003, 10.

88. Portes 2010.

89. See also Tilly and Tarrow 2015.

ties of alternative governance structures, thus influencing congruence-finding between providers and takers. Such a mechanism is captured by Beetham who, focusing on the French Revolution, argues that the shift "from regarding the state as the personal property of the ruler, to seeing it as belonging to its people" proved crucial for the political legitimacy of most modern states. "In the contemporary world it is virtually impossible for a political system to attain legitimacy without some acknowledgement of this principle in the accountability of government to a representative assembly, elected on the basis of universal suffrage."[90]

In sum, these non-exhaustive and potentially co-existing mechanisms can help us to explain how governance relations change towards greater or lesser congruence, and thus become legitimised or de-legitimised over time.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have introduced a relational meta-theory to the study of legitimation to beyond the "sources of legitimacy" literature, and put forward a theory of legitimation in international politics. I have argued that governance relations are logically prior to governance actors, who shape and are shaped by these relations. Legitimation, I noted, can be conceptualised as a process of congruence-finding between normative expectations, the legitimation patterns, of governance providers and governance takers, in which different notions of what rightful governance means are negotiated. Congruence-finding may be shaped through a set of cognitive and relational mechanisms. As governance in international politics is multi-layered, legitimation processes do not exist isolated but are always dependent on the relation's positioning within the broader network of governance relations and its actors. The degree of congruence between the legitimation patterns of a governance provider and a governance taker will shape governance actions within the relation, with more congruence giving rise to stabler governance practices.

What can we see with this theory that we did not see before? In this concluding section, I would like to argue that my theory advances the study of legitimation ontologically, substantively as well as methodologically.

Ontologically, the theory opens up several new pathways by taking governance relations, rather than institutions or rulers, as our unit of analysis. First, it allows to appreciate the multiple layers of international politics by avoiding to reify actors of legitimation. For example, a state might be both governance taker and governance provider at the same time within different governance relations. In that way, a relational perspective enables us to theorise

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90. Beetham 1991, 128.

the multiplicity of governance in international politics, the various kinds of actors involved and the way different governance relations might influence each other. Second, through such a move we can better account for change in the study of legitimation, making legible how alterations of domestic and international governance relations impact legitimation across the network. It allows us to consider the endogenous dynamics of legitimation and of its actors rather than focusing on independent characteristics and their interplay as isolated processes of (de-)legitimation. This also recasts the question of how governing actors in international politics become legitimised from one asking for sufficient and necessary conditions to one investigating legitimation as an ongoing process that continuously shapes and is shaped by actors engaged in governance relations.

Finally, the here proposed ontological shift allows us to go beyond the blind spots of the SOL approach, most importantly a ruler-centric bias, a static understanding of properties, and a reliance on pre-specified sources of legitimacy. It reminds us that we cannot simply see legitimacy as a transferable resource of a governance provider but instead as an ongoing process within a governance relation. Nevertheless, we can note that many of the SOL approach's insights can be accommodated within a relational view to legitimation: notions of legitimation seekers and legitimation audiences, of legitimation involving discursive and material action as well as the idea of a "fit" between rulers and ruled as relevant for legitimation are similarly found in my model.[91] However, by placing the study of legitimation on relational foundations, I hope to have provided a more persuasive theory of how such a fit comes about and is lost, which does not rely on static actors and properties but on endogenous process. Consequently, the integration of the SOL approach into a relational ontology might increase their analytical vigour by de-reifying the constitutive elements of legitimation processes and considering legitimation as embedded in dynamic networks of governance.

Substantively, my model offers a theory that travels well between various systems of governance. By taking governance relations as prior to actors of legitimation, a relational theory to legitimacy does not require pre-specifying who and what matters for legitimation. Rather, it depends on the idiosyncratic network of governance through which actors are constituted and in which legitimation happens. In that way, such a model allows reconnect better hitherto largely unconnected governance realms and legitimation trends within them, most crucially for the study of International Relations international and domestic governance. More importantly, it allows us to consider the various ways in which domestic governance might influence international legitimation processes and vice-versa. Conceptualising expectations about legiti-

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91. On the notion of a "fit", see Beetham 1991; Checkel 1999; Suchman 1995.

mate governance, the legitimation patterns, as scripts that diffuse across networks provides a theoretical hook to investigate why audiences interpret different or new governance relations similarly and how processes of legitimation are caught up in networks of governance.

Methodologically, the theory makes apparent a need to move beyond cause-effect models in the study of legitimation, and instead centre on the process of legitimation as such. I have sought to put forward the building blocks of such an analysis by introducing the notion of congruence-finding to this debate. Doing so, my theory remains methodologically agnostic butI would like to draw attention to a significant methodological difference to existing approaches to the study of legitimacy. A relational analysis of legitimation along the lines envisioned here proceeds by studying patterns of meaning, how people interpret material and discursive manifestations of governance, and how these patterns change and are shaped by other spatio-temporal governance relations. In that way, several methodological approaches might allow for a relational study of legitimation, most importantly social network analysis, discourse analysis and fieldwork. All three, in their various ways, help to investigate how actors become constituted as legitimation seekers or audiences, how their expectations are shaped through their various engagements and how legitimation processes are thus continuously renegotiated.

Certainly, this is only an initial attempt at theorising a relational lens to legitimation and there are limitations to the proposed conceptualisation of legitimation. First, the paper largely leaves aside the consequences of congruence-finding which remain to be comprehensively theorised and studied. However, already now we can draw on existing scholarship which highlighted compliance, stability and effectiveness as possible outcomes of successful legitimation to a governance relation.[92] Second, the theory has thus far not received thorough empirical testing. While I have given empirical examples from various types of governance relations throughout the text to illustrate its usefulness, further scholarship is needed to substantiate the theory's empirical applicability.

Third, this conceptualisation of legitimation in international politics adds more complexity to an already complex concept, especially compared to the literature on "sources of legitimacy". But the relational perspective on legitimation gives us a more comprehensive picture of contemporary governance relations within international politics by emphasising its multi-layered nature and network-like character. As such, the theory advanced here contributes to our understanding of legitimation of governance in international politics by allowing for a richer, more in-depth analysis of its underlying processes.

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92. For example, see Hurd 1999; Schmelzle and Stollenwerk 2018; Tyler 2006.

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Table 1: The Heuristic Structure of Legitimation Patterns*

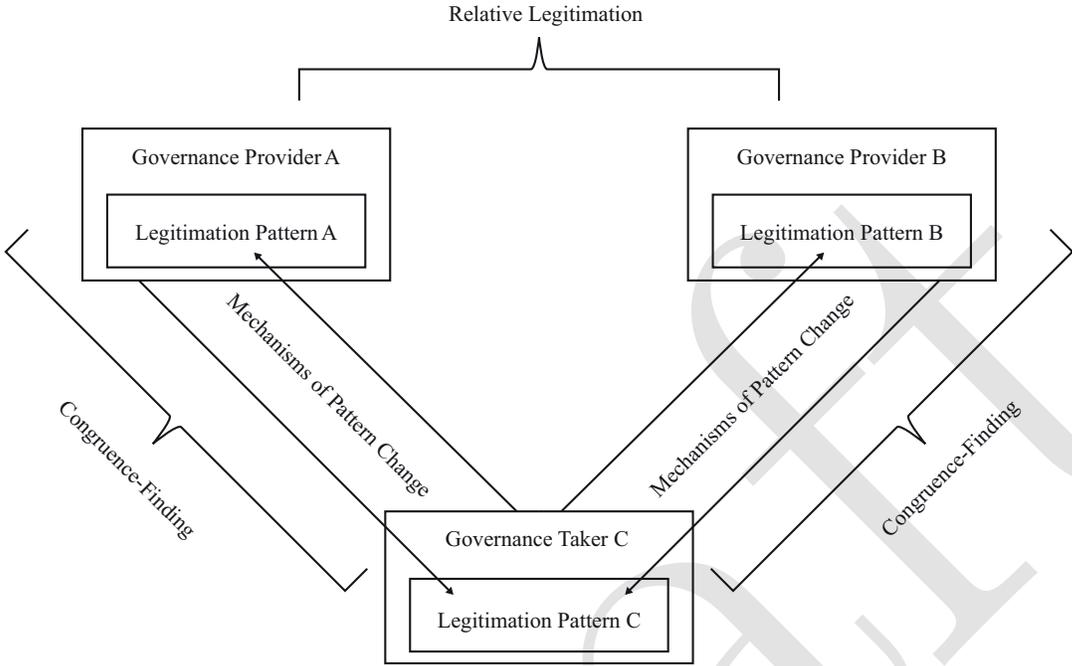|	**Legality**	**Justifiablity**		**Consent**
		Authority Source	**Common Good**	
German State	Constitutional Rule of Law	Popular Sovereignty (Inclusive)	Rights Protection	Popular Elections
European Union	Supranational Rule of Law	Technocratic Expertise & Popular Sovereignty (Delegated)	Welfare Maximisation	State Deliberations
AFD Voters	Constitutional Rule of Law	Popular Sovereignty (Exclusive)	Rights Protection	Popular Elections

*Data based on Ayerbe Linares (2019) and Beetham and Lord (1998)

Relative Legitimation

Governance Provider A

Legitimation Pattern A

Governance Provider B

Legitimation Pattern B

Mechanisms of Pattern Change

Mechanisms of Pattern Change

Congruence-Finding

Congruence-Finding

Governance Taker C

Legitimation Pattern C

Figure 1. The Process of Legitimation