

REVIEW

Greater Democracy in Intergovernmental Organizations than Supposed? Alexandru Grigorescu on Normative Pressures and Decision-Making Rules

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Democratic Intergovernmental Organizations? Normative Pressures and Decision-Making Rules, by Alexandru Grigorescu, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, ISBN 978-1-107-08999-0, 315 pages.

Some of the many books on intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) that are being published catch one's attention more firmly than others. Having read these books one is aware that one will consult them again and knows where to find them on the bookshelves or in the computer. Grigorescu's book is such a special one, because it shows and explains several trends occurring within IGOs over a lengthy period of time. The question mark in the title of his book: "Democratic Intergovernmental Organizations?" is correct, given the generally skeptical attitude toward connecting IGOs and democracy. As Robert Dahl (1999: 19) once argued: "An international organization is not and cannot be a democracy." However, Grigorescu's systematic approach and well-organized empirical data help us to understand how for more than a century IGOs have actually been altered in response to calls for greater democracy. The book's eye opener is that in this respect long-term change and evolution are stronger than often is supposed.

Democratic Norms

The book's main issue is how democratic norms have shaped IGO decision-making rules. Grigorescu discerns five democratic norms. The first two, "fair state participation" and "fair voting," focus on the degree that IGOs promote equality among states: *who* decides and *how*? The third norm is "transparency," in particular the information flows from IGOs to the public, given that public access to information is essential for accountability and responsiveness. The fourth norm is "participation of actors other than governments," based on the idea that the more of such actors can participate freely in the political process, the more democratic the system is. The last norm is "transnational parliamentary oversight" as a means of democratic checks and balances. I will come back to these norms.

While power considerations and effectiveness are recognizable in the design of IGOs, Grigorescu argues that normative pressures deriving from domestic democratic analogies have also shaped IGO rules over time. Normative pressure is a matter not only of actors promoting reform of organizations by referring to a democratic norm but also of reaction to such pressure from other member states. In practice, it takes a long time before democratic norms reach

IGOs, and in order to become effective, these norms need to become strong among multiple member states. Secondary actors, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), IGO secretariats, members of parliaments, and media, support the cause of reform; however, actual change remains a matter of battles among states over framing norms and their implementation. These views of action and reaction as well as battles among states are appealing.

The likelihood of democratic norms having an impact on specific IGO rules depends not only on the norm strength but also on events that trigger feelings about the lack of conformity to the norm. Grigorescu, who once worked in a physics laboratory, derives the latter argument from physics, where pressures are greater when the force is strong and concentrated on a very small surface. He looks for moments when there is a concentration of normative efforts, which usually happen when the status quo is seen as departing substantially from what is expected on the basis of the norm (p. 23–4).

With regard to the battles among states, Grigorescu focuses on ways to alleviate the pressures (as in physics: finding the “pressure valve”) and argues that attempting to alter the interpretation of the norm, or its implementation, can reduce pressures. Here he discerns three strategies: “challenging,” which includes a rejection of the appropriateness of the norm or the ability to apply it; “narrowing,” which entails accepting not all but only some interpretations of the norm and only some of the actions; and “broadening,” which implies promoting additional norms and actions. The likely outcomes of these actors’ strategies are, respectively, “no change” to IGO rules, “partial changes,” and “alternative changes.” The strategies and possible reactions to normative pressure deriving from a specific norm to take a certain action are clarified in a table and a figure (both 2.1, p. 31–2), which is helpful when reading the book chapters. The author provides visual support elsewhere also, as he likes illustrative schemes and has put much effort into quantifying data and providing figures in every chapter to illustrate the trends he is discussing and explaining. It may not be obvious immediately, but these simple figures cover many calculations, e.g., regarding the strength of normative pressures.

Each of the five empirical chapters focuses on one of the democratic norms mentioned above and follows the evolution of their application across time. The cases are six major IGOs (including predecessors) that were established in three major time periods: two after the First World War—the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO); two after the Second World War—the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank; and two after the end of the Cold War—the European Union (EU) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Methodologically, Grigorescu considers the critical junctures when decision-making rules were first adopted and when there were significant pressures to change them. He applies process tracing, based on primary sources as much as possible, and also assesses counterfactual arguments (different outcomes or likely outcomes in case of the absence of democratic pressures). Grigorescu has brought to light relevant older documents and texts that inform about changes or continuities at the time. He assumes that important national security and economic interests were the main factors shaping the original decision-making rules of these organizations but found that all five norms have had an impact on the rules of virtually all organizations across time. Although we cannot characterize these IGOs as democratic by domestic standards, the general trend over more than a century contradicts Dahl’s view, as it has taken the organizations closer to domestic democratic models.

Fair State Participation

Let me examine a few of Grigorescu’s cases. The norm of “fair state participation” illustrates the nuanced trends he reveals well. During the nineteenth century Concert of Europe the normative arguments of small states were based originally on the norm of “sovereign” equality, i.e., that states should not decide the fate of other states not on domestic democratic analogies. By the 1907 Hague Peace Conference, however, most small states seeking participation in international decision making had turned to the norm of “fair” (i.e., equal) participation, which the great powers had allowed in the more technical public international unions that were set up

during the second half of the nineteenth century. When the League of Nations was designed in 1919, the great powers initially “challenged” the norm of equal participation as unpractical but given the revolt of small states against the background of Woodrow Wilson’s ideals of inclusiveness and openness they changed to a strategy of “narrowing” the application of fair participation. This resulted in partial changes, as they made some concessions by adding initially two, and then four, council seats for small states alongside those for the great powers, which resulted in a balance between “perceived effectiveness of exclusive great power decision-making” and “acceptance of the norm of fair participation” (p. 61). This happened at a time of strong domestic democratic norms and coincided with the peak of Samuel Huntington’s (1991) first wave of democracy.

During the Second World War, the great powers promoted “sovereign” equality again (also mentioned in article 2 of the UN’s charter) but accepted six seats for small states on the Security Council. During the debates about enlarging the council in the 1950s, the great powers once more used the strategy of “challenging” fair participation, by questioning the applicability of domestic norms to international relations (resulting in no changes). This seemed sufficient to stave off the impetus for reform for a while (although the six seats for small states became ten in 1965), but Grigorescu (69) argues that in order to defuse the normative pressures from small states at its founding, the great powers had used a “broadening” strategy (resulting in alternative changes) to allow application of the norm of “fair” participation in UN bodies other than the Security Council, including increases in membership of the Economic and Social Council in 1965 and 1973.

During the later and still ongoing debates about Security Council reform, the strategy of “narrowing” the application of the fair representation norm was used, which resulted in informal arrangements, such as informal consultations with states outside the council and with NGOs (the so-called Arria formula). In this context Grigorescu (75) also mentions the informal “Green Room” consultations of GATT and later WTO, which he discusses in the context of inclusiveness. This, however, may be questioned, as GATT Executive Secretary Eric Wyndham White invented these consultations as a way of brokering disputes rather than allowing greater participation. Once Wyndham White sensed the possibility of rapprochement, he summoned delegates to small group meetings in the so-called Green Room, where entrenched positions were broken down in all-night negotiations (see McKenzie 2012: 4).

Fair Voting

The remarkable trend with regard to voting rules is the general move away from unanimity (linked to the traditional concept of sovereignty) to majority voting, a trend that could already be seen in the oldest IGO, the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine of 1815, as well as in the League of Nations (where unanimity is the rule, but differentiated systems of voting are also in use) and the United Nations (where majority voting is a rule, but exceptions, such as the veto privilege in the Security Council, can also be observed). Grigorescu (105–06) found that the domestic analogy to democratic institutions was used far more often at the 1945 San Francisco Conference than at Versailles in 1919. The advantage of his historical approach is that it also shows what was lost in comparison to the interwar period, such as the elimination of the League Council’s rule that a state involved in a conflict was not allowed to cast its vote and the actual veto power of small states, which could single-handedly block resolutions. In 1945, the great powers enhanced their position by abolishing these rules.

During the Cold War, there were no major changes in voting rules in the IGOs that are discussed in the book, although in the Bretton Woods institutions and regional development banks voting weights were adjusted as a result of a “narrowing” strategy, resulting in partial changes. In the post–Cold War era, however, the voting power of small states in the Bretton Woods institutions declined compared to that of the great powers. While small states used a “broadening” strategy vis-à-vis the UN Security Council in the 1990s by discussing both its

voting system and membership, hoping to get partial results, the great powers used a strategy of “narrowing” in order to reduce the normative pressures for membership reforms, but they did not link this to the veto system but rather to more transparency (113).

Transparency

The transparency chapter is also relevant for people in Communication Studies, given its information about relations between IGOs and the media or close relations between journalists and foreign ministries. Once again, a figure (5.2) clarifies the various flows of information from IGOs to the public: direct, through member states, or via NGOs. While the press at the time often did not have access to national parliamentary assemblies, it was given extraordinary access to league meetings, receiving all documents that were circulated. In 1926, 333 newspapers and 28 agencies received press accreditations to the League Assembly, while the league’s information section offered some 200 communiqués per year. Because not all council meetings were open, small states applied normative pressure to achieve both an increased representation on the council and more transparency. Grigorescu (143) argues that this combination, rather than placing the two norms under the broader umbrella of democracy as was done in the UN in the 1990s, explains why the expansion of council membership in 1923 only added two more members for small states, as the great powers used the increase in transparency as a way to defuse pressure for even greater enlargement of membership. This was also the case in the early 1930s, when transparency was augmented again in response to (unsuccessful) pressure for increases in membership. Grigorescu (173) emphasizes rightly that “broadening” strategies imply that various aspects of democratization of IGOs need to be studied simultaneously, as they often affect each other.

His (148) thesis about a “broadening” strategy is less convincing in the 1980s, when Security Council transparency improved during a period with no formal reform efforts, but he correctly shows that IGOs struggled with the application of the transparency norm, including a culture of secrecy at the Bretton Woods institutions that could not withstand heavy criticisms. Despite resistance of both IGO staff and government representatives, transparency policies and practices increased, mainly as a result of visible scandals at national and international levels (e.g., Oil-for-Food at the UN) but also because governments sent transparency signals to IGOs. Here the rise of national Freedom of Information Acts and the impact of the new right of access to public documents played a role.

Participation of NGOs

NGO access to IGOs is a more familiar topic in international studies (e.g., Charnovitz 1997; Davies 2013) than the previous norms, but the topic’s understanding is mainly based on the usefulness of NGOs in resolving collective actions, rather than on linking NGO activities with the democratic character of IGOs in the sense of checks and balances. Grigorescu’s analysis, therefore, focuses on the clash between those promoting increased NGO participation in IGO work and those opposing this. Compared to the broader practice of the League of Nations, the great powers in 1945 used a “narrowing” strategy by restricting NGO inclusion to the UN ECOSOC and replacing the original charter wording of “participation without a vote” with “consultation.” There were no references to “democracy” in this respect, neither in the league nor in the UN.

Although generally speaking the number of NGOs having consultative status in the UN system has continued to rise, Grigorescu’s approach reveals what he (189) calls a “cooler relationship,” resulting from the fact that Cold War tensions had led both superpowers to use NGOs for their own purposes. In 1967, this created greater control and limitation of NGO participation in UN activities. According to UN expert Pei-heng Chiang (1981: 161), the UN preferred to accept those NGOs that contributed technical experience and disseminated information about UN policies, rather than those that would want to intervene in the formulation

of UN policies or to criticize UN policies and actions. The experience of human rights NGOs, now generally accepted but not in the beginning, illustrates Chiang's point. Another example discussed by Grigorescu (194) are the grassroots movements that began to criticize the lack of information and ability to influence plans for World Bank projects in the mid-1980s, resulting in pressure for NGO access and voting changes under the umbrella of "democratization" of the Bretton Woods institutions in the 1990s and 2000s.

Grigorescu (197) qualifies the ECOSOC debates in 1996 as a compromise between those supporting a greater role for NGOs in the UN system and those opposing it. Resolution 1996/31 included two references to "democracy," telling NGOs to be organized and to reach decisions in a democratic fashion. His interpretation is that of a "challenging" strategy, used to defuse normative pressures for greater active participation by linking NGOs, but not states or the UN itself, to democratic decision making.

On a more critical note, Grigorescu's (191) thesis that the European Economic Community's first real consultations with NGOs took place in the environmental realm can be questioned, as he does not mention the consultative committees of the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Economic Community, which engaged not only employers (that he mentions), but also workers, consumers, and traders. The early engagement of several key economic actors was meant to build transnational coalitions in support of European policies and allowed the nongovernmental actors to take initiatives (Milward 1995).

Presence of Parliamentary Bodies

The topic of transnational parliamentary oversight is illustrated by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (created in 1889), which promoted parliamentary oversight from outside IGOs, and the parliamentary assemblies of the Council of Europe and the European Union, with democratic normative pressures to alter IGO rules within the two European institutions. Grigorescu reminds us of the ways in which the British government opposed Winston Churchill's efforts to set up the Council of Europe in 1949 by first using a "broadening" strategy (unrealistically suggesting a study of the possibility of a global parliament), followed by a harsh "narrowing" strategy, with the British doing all they could to erode the institution's power. Grigorescu then shifts to the impressive development of the European Parliament, which eventually gained co-decision powers within the EU, to a large extent as a result of its own performance and the use of windows of opportunity.

Grigorescu's jump from the early Council of Europe to the later EU developments may leave the impression that the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly has remained a lame duck. However, Jill Lovecy (2004) showed that soon after its establishment, the Parliamentary Assembly developed into a policy entrepreneur in its own right, successfully proposing common actions across a whole range of policy fields, especially human rights. Elements that explain this unexpected outcome are the assembly's use of the council's dominant policy frame, centered on marrying democratic institutions and enforceable human rights, the assembly's exercise of its right of policy initiative in a modest way, and the fact that a high proportion of the assembly's early members was drawn from the ranks of the European Movement. Often they were better informed than the ministers and had solutions that were difficult to ignore.

Conclusion

It is to be appreciated that, after publishing several articles on different facets of democracy and IGOs, Grigorescu decided to assemble his insights into a monograph. This draws attention to what has happened over longer periods of time and allows the assessment of developments in a way different from the skeptical view, as expressed by Dahl, even if IGOs incorporate domestic democratic norms only slowly and partially. The historical approach makes it possible to pay closer attention to specific organizations, including predecessors, and often provides comparative views as other IGO examples are also mentioned. All chapters and the book itself

end with a similar set of questions that summarize and assess the developments systematically, with strong tables and figures.

As highlighted herein, Grigorescu's is a clear analysis presenting general trends occasionally open to criticism. Some of the issues he raises could have been elaborated in greater detail. For example, the interrelationship between the five normative pressures, the extent that nongovernmental actors do indeed provide checks on IGO executive bodies (rather than only have consultative participation), and whether transnational parliamentary bodies actually furnish the suggested correcting oversight. Nonetheless, while the debate on democratic intergovernmental organizations will undoubtedly be continued, Grigorescu's volume will offer a new point of departure.

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