

Decision-Making in International Organizations: Actors, Preferences, and Institutions

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Abstract: International organizations (IOs) experience significant variation in their capacity to adopt new policies. While some are efficient decision-making machineries, others are plagued by gridlock. How can such variation be explained? This paper offers the first systematic and comparative analysis of the decision-making capacity of IOs. Empirically, we map and evaluate the decision-making capacity of 20 IOs over the time period 1980-2015. The dataset operationalizes decision-making capacity as the annual policy output of an IO's main interstate decision-making body. Theoretically, we advance a rational institutionalist argument centered on three features of the decision-making setting: the number of states, the heterogeneity of their preferences, and the decision rules that govern policy adoption. Broadly in line with the theory, the analysis demonstrates that IOs' decision-making capacity is adversely affected by large memberships and high preference heterogeneity, and that demanding decision rules aggravate the problem of preference heterogeneity. We find no support for the realist expectation that hegemons pave the way for international cooperation, or for the constructivist expectation that attention to the number of actors and their preferences is misplaced.

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Introduction

International organizations (IOs) are varyingly capable of adopting policies to address societal problems within their mandates. Some IOs, such as the United Nations (UN) Security Council, have been deadlocked for most of their existence and are best known for their failures to deliver. Other IOs, such as the European Union (EU), have developed such encompassing policy portfolios that little remains exclusively national within their domains of governance. At the same time, it is clear that many IOs experience significant variation over time in their capacity to adopt new policies. While some IOs have witnessed expansions in policy adoption over time, others have seen declines or experienced significant fluctuations.

How can we explain such variation in the decision-making capacity of IOs over time and across organizations? What factors make IOs efficient decision-making machineries or, alternatively, generate gridlock? Gaining a better understanding of this issue is important for both research and policy-making. The decision-making capacity of IOs matters because it defines their ability to respond to urgent societal problems. While IOs have grown more numerous over time (Shanks et al. 1996), and gained increasing political authority (Hooghe and Marks 2015), these efforts at international problem-solving will amount to little unless IOs are also responsive and efficient. While enforcing peace, reducing poverty, liberalizing trade, and preventing the spread of infectious diseases will require more than decision-making, it is a first and necessary requirement for IOs to make a difference (Tallberg et al. forthcoming).

To advance our understanding of IO decision-making capacity, we need systematic analysis across a large number of cases and extended time periods. While existing research offers informative analyses of decision-making in specific IOs, such as the UN (Holloway and Tomlinson 1995; Allen and Yuen 2013; Vreeland and Dreher 2014), EU (Schulz and König 2000; Thomson 2006; Naurin and Wallace 2008), and World Trade Organization (WTO)

(Ehlermann and Ehring 2005; Elsig 2010), these studies can tell us little about general patterns and explanations of IO decision-making capacity. In this sense, the study of decision-making in IOs differs from that of legislative institutions at the national level, where extensive progress has been reached in recent years through systematic comparisons (e.g., Arter 2006; König et al. 2010; Lindvall 2016).

In this paper, we address the question of IOs' decision-making capacity theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, we develop a rational institutionalist argument centered on three features of IO decision-making as a strategic setting: the number of actors, the heterogeneity of actor preferences, and the decision rules that govern policy adoption. Drawing on previous rationalist research in Comparative Politics and International Relations, we hypothesize that greater numbers of actors, higher preference heterogeneity, and more demanding institutional hurdles impact IOs' decision-making capacity negatively. We also discuss interdependencies between these factors and contrast this rationalist theory of IO decision-making with alternative expectations rooted in constructivist and realist research.

Empirically, we offer the first comparative and systematic assessment of the decision-making capacity of IOs, based on a dataset of 20 organizations over the time period 1980-2015. The sample of IOs is designed to enable comparison and generalizability by including IOs active in different policy areas and world regions. The dataset operationalizes decision-making capacity as the annual policy output of an IO's main interstate decision-making body. By IOs, we mean formal intergovernmental, multilateral and bureaucratic organizational structures established to further cooperation among states (Martin and Simmons 2012; Rittberger et al. 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2015).

Our principal findings offer extensive support for the theory. First, the analysis shows that an IO's number of member states strongly affects its decision-making capacity. The higher the number of member states, the lower the policy output. In line with this logic, we also

demonstrate that accessions of new member states to an IO have negative effects over time on the decision-making capacity. Second, we establish that preference heterogeneity among member states, as expected, negatively affects IOs' capacity to adopt new policy. IOs with memberships characterized by high levels of conflicting interests have a harder time agreeing on policy. Third, while decision rules have ambiguous independent effects, they are consequential in interactions with the other two factors. In line with our theory, the negative effect of preference heterogeneity among member states is particularly strong when decisions require unanimous support, as compared to majority support. However, the negative effect of a large membership is stronger when decisions are made through majority voting. Assessing alternative expectations derived from constructivist and realist research, we find only limited support for the former and no support for the latter.

This paper proceeds in four parts. First, we outline the rationalist theory of IO decision-making, discussing the logic behind our expectations and identifying alternative expectations in constructivist and realist scholarship. Second, we introduce the dataset and illustrate patterns in IO decision-making capacity across IOs and over time. Third, we engage in an explanatory analysis of IO decision-making capacity and discuss our results. We end with a brief conclusion.

A Rational Institutional Theory of IO Decision-Making

We draw on general tenets of rational choice institutionalism to develop a theory of IO decision-making capacity. Rational choice institutionalism assumes that decision outcomes are the result of strategic interactions between goal-oriented actors operating within institutional constraints (Scharpf 1997; Schepsle 2008). This basic approach to decision-making has generated powerful

analyses of the workings of different types of national political systems (Tsebelis 2002; Ward 2002) and international institutions (Lake and Powell 1999; Martin and Simmons 2012).

Our theory reduces decision-making within IOs to three central features of the strategic setting: the number of actors, the heterogeneity of these actors' preferences, and the applicable decision rules. In developing the logic behind each of these features, we draw on previous rationalist research in Comparative Politics and International Relations. We begin by discussing each factor in turn, explaining the logic and deriving testable hypotheses about their independent effects on IO decision-making capacity. We then move on to suggest interdependent relationships between these factors, which may be empirically tested through interaction effects. Finally, we outline alternative expectations about the influence of these factors grounded in constructivist and realist scholarship.

Number of Actors

IOs vary greatly in the number of member states (Shanks et al. 1996; Pevehouse et al. 2004). Global IOs, such as the UN, the World Bank, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are open to all states and may have close to 200 members. Regional IOs, such as the African Union (AU), North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are geographically bound and may have everything from three (NAFTA) to 54 member states (AU).

Many IOs have seen significant changes in the composition of memberships over time, usually through accessions. The EU was originally founded by six states in 1952, but has successively enlarged to 28 members. The International Whaling Commission (IWC) started as

a club among eleven whale hunting nations, but subsequently changed in orientation and membership to today's 88 states, most of which have never engaged in whaling. The membership of the international trade regime has expanded from the original 23 signatories of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to 123 states when the WTO was created in 1994, and then to the current membership of 162 states. Changes in IO memberships due to withdrawals also exist, as in the case of the US leaving the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2011 after the IO voted to accept Palestine as a member, but are less frequent and profound (Vabulas 2015).

That numbers matter for international cooperation is a conventional wisdom in rationalist IR. Drawing on collective action theory (Olson 1965) and game theory (Axelrod 1984), IR scholars have theorized that international cooperation becomes more difficult to establish and sustain with greater numbers of players (Axelrod and Keohane 1985; Oye 1985; Ruggie 1992; Keohane and Ostrom 1995). Large numbers impede cooperation because they increase the transaction costs involved in reaching agreement, invite free-riding as monitoring compliance becomes more difficult, and create collective-action problems in sanctioning defectors. Subsequent research has shown that these problems lead states to design IOs in ways that facilitate large-number cooperation, for instance, by adopting more permissive voting rules and delegating more extensively to supranational bodies (Kahler 1992; Koremenos et al. 2001; Hooghe and Marks 2015).

Focusing specifically on decision-making in IOs, there are two principal reasons why the number of member states alone should affect an organization's capacity to adopt new policy. First, multilateral bargaining among a large number of states involves greater transaction costs than unilateral or bilateral bargaining (Scharf 1997, 151). Large multilateral negotiations, such as the UN climate change negotiations and WTO trade negotiations, are highly complex from a bargaining perspective, since they involve a very large number of parties whose preferences

must be identified and aggregated for agreements to result (Hampson 1995). “[T]he more parties in the negotiations, the greater the negotiations are delayed simply because more positions must be exchanged” (Morrow 1999, 191). In addition, the number of potential coalitions grows exponentially with the number of member states, generating problems of coordination and aggregation. In sum, “the complexity of N-person situations militates against identification and realization of common interests” (Oye 1985, xx).

Second, when decisions require unanimity or consensus, a higher number of member states means more players with veto power, reducing the scope for agreement (Shubik 1982; Morrow 1999; Tsebelis 2002). Coalition theory further suggests that more parties makes agreement under unanimity or consensus more difficult to achieve by decreasing the proportion of winning coalitions (Hosli et al. 2002). Multilateral negotiations among a large number of veto players thus face higher barriers to reform, are less likely to lead to new decisions, and are more likely to protect the status quo. “Multilateralism among formally sovereign states can be regarded as a recipe for deadlock” (Hooghe and Marks 2015, 313).

So far, we have treated decision-making in IOs as a matter for member states. Yet one of the most profound developments in international cooperation over recent decades is the growing involvement of non-state actors in IO policy-making (Steffek et al. 2008; Jönsson and Tallberg 2010; Tallberg et al. 2013). While most extensive at the policy-making stages of agenda setting, implementation, monitoring, and enforcement, non-state involvement has become more common in decision-making as well, as civil society groups, business associations, and labor unions increasingly are allowed to be present, make statements, and even vote in interstate decision-making bodies (Tallberg et al. 2014, 10). In a parallel development, a growing number of IOs have created international parliamentary assemblies with consultative or decision-making authority (Lenz et al. 2015; Rocabert et al. 2016).

Non-state actor involvement in IO decision-making effectively extends the number of actors, and can be expected to have the same effect on decision-making capacity. While non-state involvement may strengthen the legitimacy of IOs, it likely renders decision-making more cumbersome, time consuming, and inefficient. Even where non-state actors only are allowed to witness negotiations from the gallery, the consequences may be negative. “When governments desire secrecy to air possible compromises, or are at the stage of logrolling once positions have solidified, they may find NGO participation undesirable or not useful” (Raustiala 1997, 733). Often, non-state involvement is more ambitious with potentially more far-reaching consequences. Consulting with non-state actors increases the transaction costs of decision-making, as room must be created in the policy process for input and deliberation (Rasmussen and Toshkov 2013). If non-state actors have the right to vote, they become actors in their own right, whose preferences must be identified and factored into coalition building. And in the rare case that they possess veto power, as the European Parliament in the EU, this equals adding another member state with veto power, with predictable effects on decision-making efficiency (Golub 1999; König 2007).

Taken together, a consideration of the number of actors in IO decision-making yields two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a. The higher the number of member states, the lower the decision-making capacity of an IO.

Hypothesis 1b. The greater the level of TNA involvement, the lower the decision-making capacity of an IO.

These hypotheses are associated with particular observable implications regarding over-time changes within individual IOs. Accession of new member states should lower the decision-making capacity of an IO, all else equal. Conversely, secession of existing member states should raise the decision-making capacity of an IO, all else equal. Increases in the level of TNA involvement should lower the decision-making capacity of an IO, all else equal. Conversely, reductions in the level of TNA involvement should raise the decision-making capacity of an IO, all else equal.

Preference Heterogeneity

The second fundamental factor is the distribution of preferences among member states engaged in decision-making. IR scholars debate whether state preferences originate from relative power positions, economic interests, political ideology, or national identities (Moravcsik 1997; Frieden 1999). For our purposes, this is a secondary issue. What matters is the distribution of preferences regardless of their origin, since this shapes the scope for agreement among negotiating parties.

When states engage in negotiation and decision-making within IOs, they usually have both conflicting and common interests (Snidal 1985; Martin 1992). They have a common interest in finding a joint solution to a shared policy problem (or else they would not be negotiating), but typically conflicting views on the type of solution to adopt. While, in theory, it is possible to conceive of pure coordination games where actor interests are harmonious (Stein 1983), it is more realistic to assume that all issues in world politics involve conflicts of interest at some level (Krasner 1991).

While interest conflicts thus are ubiquitous, the level of preference heterogeneity matters greatly for decision-making within IOs. Formal modelers have demonstrated how the scope for an agreement (win-set) shrinks with a more heterogeneous distribution of preferences (Scharpf 1997). Bargaining theorists have reached the same conclusion by analyzing the degree of interest overlap (zone of agreement) in alternative settings (Young 1991). Where states' preferences are positioned closer to each other, the common ground on which a decision can be built is larger, and states therefore more likely to conclude an agreement. Conversely, when state preferences diverge extensively, coming to an agreement at all may be very difficult and require facilitating strategies such as issue linkages and side payments (Luce and Raiffa 1957; Héritier 1999). While such strategies may be effective, they require time. As Schulz and König (2000, 656-6) explain:

Side-payments and linkage across issues and across time are strategies to bring about policy change in situations in which the simple spatial model would predict gridlock. However, bargaining over side-payments and package deals increases the duration of the decision-making process. The possibility of effective blockages of the decision-making process makes actors take longer to resolve differences over policy and strike a mutually acceptable bargain. By contrast, if there is a broad agreement among actors to change policy, there is no need for time-consuming negotiations over side payments and package deals.

Preference heterogeneity varies both across IOs and within IOs over time, depending on member states and issues. Given their potentially universal memberships, global IOs often harbor extensive variation in state preferences. They span states with different levels of economic development, different political systems, and different cultural spheres. Regional IOs, in contrast, are often built on more homogeneous geographical communities (Hooghe and Marks 2015). In addition, the issues governed by an IO may be varyingly divisive among the member states. The regulation of whaling in the IWC, for instance, is confronted with a bimodal distribution of preferences, pitting whaling nations against conservation states. In contrast, a

cartel like the International Coffee Organization (ICO) is organized around an issue where the members have similar (producer) interests vis-à-vis other (consumer) countries.

Changes in the preferences of one or several member states can potentially have extensive consequences for the decision-making capacity of IOs. In democracies, such changes frequently result from general elections that bring new parties into power. In the case of the EU, the election of Margaret Thatcher as British prime minister in 1979 led to a broad shift in the positions of the UK, with observable effects on the time it took for legislation to be adopted in the EU's Council of Ministers (Golub 1999). Conversely, when Tony Blair succeeded John Major as prime minister in 1997, this enabled the EU to move ahead on employment and social policy previously blocked by the conservative government (Tallberg and Johansson 2008). When governments adopt or surrender outlier positions on the spectrum of state preferences, changes such as these immediately affect the scope for agreement in IO decision-making.

Taken together, a consideration of the level of preference heterogeneity in IOs yields the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The higher the heterogeneity of member state preferences, the lower the decision-making capacity of an IO.

This hypothesis is associated with particular observable implications regarding over-time changes within individual IOs. Growing heterogeneity of member state preferences should lower the decision-making capacity of an IO, all else equal. Conversely, reduced heterogeneity of member state preferences should raise the decision-making capacity of an IO, all else equal.

Decision Rules

Finally, the rules that govern decision-making should shape the capacity for policy adoption. Voting rules are the topic of a classic literature in Comparative Politics (Shapley and Shubik 1954; Banzhaf 1965), and an area of growing research in International Relations (Koremenos et al. 2001; Hooghe and Marks 2015; Blake and Payton 2015). In the practice of international cooperation, three types of decision rules dominate: unanimity or consensus, majority voting, and weighted voting. In addition, decision-making in some IOs is subject special arrangements, such as multiple-veto systems and fast-track procedures. Decision rules are designed with a view to, and are expected to have consequences for, state control over IOs, the attraction of IO membership, IO responsiveness to policy concerns, and state compliance with IO rules (Blake and Payton 2015). Decision rules are typically highly contested institutional issues, as in the case of the recent redistribution of votes within the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in view of the economic strength of emerging powers, or the recurring recalculations of votes in the EU.

A cross-sectional picture of voting rules in 266 IOs in 2004 reveals that majority voting is the most common decision rule (118 IOs) (Blake and Payton 2015). Majority voting requires that a certain proportion of member states – single or qualified majority – support a decision for it to be adopted. States opposed to the decision usually seek to form a blocking minority. The second most common decision rule in international cooperation is unanimity or consensus (92 IOs). Unanimity or consensus requires that all member states agree to a decision, or at least do not actively oppose it by wielding the veto. The third decision rule, weighted voting, is the least common and of declining relative importance (47 IOs). In systems of weighted voting, shares of the total number of votes are distributed unequally among the member states in reflection of principles such as economic strength (IMF) and population (EU).

The use of decision rule in an IO has clear implications for its capacity to adopt policy. Given a particular set of actors and preferences, a lax decision rule (majority voting) makes it easier for an IO to adopt policy than a demanding decision rule (unanimity or consensus). As a variant of majoritarian rule, weighted voting should be more conducive to efficient decision-making than unanimity, but how it compares to pure majority voting is highly contingent on the specific adoption criteria and the preferences of the states with the most votes.

Unanimity or consensus is an invitation to gridlock, as any state can block reform by wielding the veto. As Blake and Payton (2015, 383) explain: “The need to find a universally acceptable outcome means that unanimity is often associated with gridlock, hindering the ability of IGOs to respond quickly and effectively to the shifting demands of their members. This is particularly so if those demands require ‘deep’ cooperation involving significant adjustments in states’ behavior as the need for full approval leads to lowest common denominator outcomes and ‘shallower’ cooperation.”

In comparison, majority voting is much more permissive. It involves a considerably lower institutional hurdle to be passed for decisions to be adopted. In the language of formal modelling, majority voting enlarges the win-set, increases the proportion of winning coalitions, and expedites decisions (Golub 2008, 169). Scharpf (1997, 151) arrives at the same conclusion based on a consideration of transaction costs: “[T]he choices of very large numbers of actors may be coordinated at very moderate transaction costs if collectively binding decisions can be imposed by majority rule.” The implication should be that decisions cannot only be more easily reached, but also should be more responsive to the policy problems confronting the IO: “A strength of majoritarian voting is its capacity to promote IGO responsiveness as no state, and often no coalition of a small subset of the IGO’s membership, has the ability to block decisions. Thus, decisions can be taken more quickly and they can be more far-reaching in terms of what they call upon states to do to further the IGO’s objectives” (Blake and Payton 2015, 384).

Taken together, a consideration of decision rules in IOs yields the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: The more demanding the decision rule, the lower the decision-making capacity of an IO.

This hypothesis is associated with particular observable implications regarding over-time changes within individual IOs. Shifts toward more demanding decision rules should lower the decision-making capacity of an IO, all else equal. Conversely, shifts toward less demanding decision rules should raise the decision-making capacity of an IO, all else equal.

Expected Interactions

The number of actors, the preferences of these actors, and the rules that govern their decision-making are distinct factors, but also interrelated components of a decision-making system. While we have so far discussed the anticipated effects of one factor holding the other factors constant, we now consider how they are expected to interact in facilitating or obstructing decision-making in IOs. Three sets of interaction effects can be expected based on the logic of the theory:

- The negative effect of a larger number of member states should be stronger under a higher level of preference heterogeneity and a more demanding decision rule.
- The negative effect of a higher level of preference heterogeneity should be stronger under a larger number of member states and a more demanding decision rule.

- The negative effect of a more demanding decision rule should be stronger under a larger number of member states and a higher level of preference heterogeneity.

A joint consideration of all three factors further suggests the strategic settings when IOs should be most and least capable of effective decision-making. IOs should be most capable when they have few member states, these states have homogenous preferences, and decisions only require the support of a majority. Conversely, IOs should be least capable when they have many member states, this membership harbors a high level of preference heterogeneity, and decisions require unanimous consent.

Alternative Expectations

Constructivism and realism offer alternative expectations to those privileged in our rational institutionalist account of IO decision-making.

Constructivist research suggests that a strategic perspective on actors, preferences, and institutions might be misguided, since it neglects the role of deliberation, persuasion, and socialization within IOs (Checkel 2001; Risse 2002). Drawing on deliberative theory, research in this tradition suggests that the number of actors is not as important as the deliberation that goes on between them. The complexity of issues entails that instrumental bargaining will be insufficient for group decision-making (Dryzek 1987). Only by engaging in deliberation among a large number of actors can groups take informed decisions (Landmore 2012). Adding more actors to the decision-making process therefore does not hurt it; owing to informal dynamics of deliberation, including more voices in IOs may instead increase both the quality and the quantity of decision-making (Joerges and Neyer 1997; Neyer 2004; Kleine and Risse 2010).

Constructivist research also offers an alternative perspective on the nature and importance of preferences in IO decision-making. Rather than conceptualizing actors as driven by exogenously defined preferences, whose heterogeneity determines the scope for agreement, constructivists see preferences as endogenous and subject to change. Social interaction leads states to reinterpret their preferences, generating convergence in interests over time (Checkel 2003). Alternatively, states operate according to a different logic of action, reducing the importance of preferences for collective decision-making. As Risse (2000, 7) theorizes, “where argumentative rationality prevails, actors do not seek to maximize or satisfy their given interests and preferences.” Regardless of objection, the expectation is that levels of preference heterogeneity should matter less to IO decision-making than a rational institutionalism account would suggest.

Finally, constructivist research challenges the emphasis on formal decision rules as essential determinants of IO decision-making capacity. Not only is it questionable that decision rules would be of such importance if preference heterogeneity is not as central. In addition, it appears that informal norms may mitigate or even reverse the implications of formal decision rules. In the EU, constructivists point out, member states tend to resort to consensus decision-making, even where the treaties stipulate qualified majority voting, because of a norm to bring all states onboard and the greater legitimacy of decisions taken by the full membership (Lewis 2005; Heisenberg 2005). Similar patterns of consensus decision-making where formal rules provide for lower institutional barriers also exist in IOs such as the IMF and the Inter-American Development Bank (Tussie 1995; Footer 1996/97).

Research in the realist tradition challenges the rational institutionalist account of IO decision-making by emphasizing the role of power in the strategic interaction between actors, preferences, and institutions. In this view, it is not the number of actors that matters as much as the distribution of power among them. As suggested by hegemonic stability theory, dominance

by a single state may be conducive to IO decision-making. When one state enjoys widely superior resources, it is in a position to buy the support of other countries through side payments (Drezner 2007; Stone 2011). Compensating losers who would otherwise have blocked a policy, the dominant state ensures passage of the policy it favors. Germany's role as Europe's paymaster, underwriting ambitious new EU policy programs, is a case in point, as is the United States' extension of financial favors to elected members of the UN Security Council in return for political support (Vreeland and Dreher 2014).

By the same token, it is not the preference heterogeneity among all states that matters, but that between the great powers. Realist accounts of international cooperation typically reduce IO decision-making to strategic interaction among the dominant states of an organization or global governance as a whole (Moravcsik 1998; Drezner 2007).

Finally, realist research offers an alternative perspective on the role of decision rules. According to one type of argument, formal decision rules matter, but are typically determined by the most powerful states and designed to safeguard their dominance and interests (Mearsheimer 1994/95). Weighted voting as decision rule is the institutional expression of this logic (Blake and Payton 2015), well exemplified in the status of the P5 in the UN Security Council, the US dominance in the IMF and the World Bank, and the "directoire" of Germany, France, and the UK in the EU. Alternatively, realists emphasize how formal decision rules, where these provide for equality between member states, are trumped by informal practices of great power privilege. While it is true that an IO such as the WTO formally stipulates consensus decision-making, the effective control of the organization has historically been in the hands of the US and the EU (Steinberg 2002; Stone 2011).

Mapping Decision-Making in International Organizations

The Dataset: Policy Output in 20 International Organizations

The dataset operationalizes decision-making capacity as the annual policy output of an IO's main interstate decision-making body. We select a sample of 20 IOs on the basis of a common platform of data gathering on the design and authority of 36 global and regional IOs (Table A.1). From these 36 organizations, we only include IOs where the main decision-making body issues individual policy decisions, and not only one communiqué or declaration per meeting. The sample includes both global and regional IOs, and in the latter category, regional IOs from all parts of the world. It also contains both specialized IOs, such as the IWC and the IMF, and multi-purpose IOs dealing with a wide range of policy issues, like the EU and the AU.

We focus on the main interstate decision-making body for several reasons. First, these governing bodies come closest to the domestic notion of a legislator. As Blake and Payton (2015, 388) explain, decisions in some IOs might be delegated by the main interstate body to other organs, but this body typically establishes the core policy direction of the IO, sets the agenda for other organs to pursue, and those other organs are accountable to the main interstate body. Second, this focus makes IOs more comparable, since they always possess a governing body that represents all member states. "The widespread presence of such a body makes it a point of comparison across IGOs and increases the validity of the data collected because we can be confident that we are collecting the data on IGO organs that perform largely similar roles within their institutions" (Blake and Payton 2015, 388). However, we are aware of important limitations. Other bodies of an IO, such as committees, parliamentary assemblies, and even courts, might adopt decisions as well. Thus, we cannot claim to capture all policy output of an

IO. We also have to acknowledge that IOs differ in institutional design, with some IOs delegating authority more extensively to supranational bodies (Hooghe and Marks 2015).

We select the main interstate decision-making body according to the specification of organizational tasks in the founding treaty. In cases where more than one body exists at the same level - typically multiple ministerial councils for different issue areas – we code all bodies as one. Whereas for most IOs, the selection is uncontroversial, some choices are more ambiguous. The case of the UN, for instance, offers the choice between the General Assembly and the Security Council. Other IOs have two main governing bodies, such as the Conference and the Council of the Food and Agriculture Organization. In such cases, we opt for the body that is concerned with substantial decisions-making.

The data was gathered from official archives of IOs. In most cases, these data are available electronically. Where this has not been the case, we contacted secretariats, repository libraries, and secondary sources to complete the information gathered from the archives. The observation period spans the years from 1980 to 2015, sufficiently long to reveal long-term trends from the Cold War era until today. Moreover, the beginning of the observation period is recent enough to increase the likelihood that data are available. In most cases, we have collected the full text of individual decisions. Where access was restricted, we at least got the number of decisions and a selection of documents. Although most IOs are very fast in archiving, we have some missing values for the most recent years where the data have not yet been released.

In this paper, we focus on the policy volume as a measure of an IO's decision-making capacity. Studying the scope and change of the policy output may answer a number of questions related to IO performance (Tallberg et al. forthcoming). Have individual IOs become more or less productive over time? If policy volume has changed, it could be explained by institutional reforms, new accessions, conflicts among member states, or other factors. Similar patterns in

the policy volume across IOs could be interpreted as a common trend toward higher or lower decision-making capacity.

The volume of policy output is a common measure in studies of domestic legislative performance (Olson and Nonidez 1972; Arter 2006). Damgaard and Jensen (2006), for instance, compare the number of bills adopted by the Danish Folketing over time. There are also a number of studies that assess the policy volume of IOs, mostly limited to EU and UN bodies. Alesina et al. (2005) have mapped the expansion of EU legislation by the number of legal acts (see also Golub 1999; Christensen 2010; Pollack 2000). Pollack and Hafner-Burton (2010, 294) build an index of gender-related policy output based on the total number of activities carried out by the European Commission. Similarly, scholars have assessed the policy volume of the UN General Assembly (Marín-Bosch 1987; Holloway and Tomlinson 1995) and the Security Council (Allen and Yuen 2014). In studies of international courts, the volume of decisions often features as an indicator of their effectiveness, like in the case of the European Court of Human Rights (Cichowski 2006; see also Alter 2014).

Policy volume is typically operationalized in quantitative terms, as the number of policy decisions within a given period. Measuring the quantity of an IO's policy output allows for a definition of zero – when an IO has been completely inactive. It also gives a precise representation of changes in an IO's productivity over time. Empirically, the yearly volume of policy output varies greatly.

We operationalize the decision-making capacity of IOs as the absolute number of yearly policy output. To enhance comparability across IOs, we add two alternative measures, inspired by Mitchell (2004, 133f). His first alternative is similar to benchmarks, and to this end we transform the data to an index based on the median annual output between 1980 and 2015. His other alternative is to use annual changes in absolute levels.

Patterns in IO Policy Output, 1980-2015

The analysis of the policy output of the 20 IOs reveals that there is no uniform pattern over time. In Figure 1, we display the absolute number of yearly policy decisions of nine selected IOs, representing three groups with high, medium and low policy volume. In Figure 2, we provide a comparison of all 20 IOs in the sample, based on a standardized measure of the policy volume where we weight the number of decisions by the over-time median of each IO.

First, the analysis reveals that variation across organizations is enormous. Some decision-making bodies in our samples only provide a dozen decisions per year, as in the case of the IWC. At one end of the scale, the Arab Maghreb Union has a lifetime output of ten decisions from four meetings in the early 1990s. At the other end of the scale, some IOs adopt hundreds of decisions per year. The EU tops this ranking, with about 800 directives, regulations, decisions and recommendations yearly during the 1980s.

Second, there is no uniform trend over time. We neither observe widespread continuous growth over time, nor stagnation, as the dominant pattern. The standardization of the policy volume on the basis of the IO median in Figure 2 allows us to identify five different patterns. First, there are a few IOs with an increasing decision-making capacity over time, like the AU, or with some interruptions, the Council of Europe, and the UN. Second, we can identify a number of IOs whose decision-making capacity peaks once or twice during the observation period, and decreases thereafter, like the IWC and the WTO. Third, some IOs produce a relatively constant number of policies over time, with only minor variation, among them, the FAO and the WHO. Fourth, output for some IO decision-making bodies varies from year to year, without a clear trend. Examples are the Nordic Council and the Andean Community. Finally, some IOs, like the EU and the IMF, show a slight downward trend in the number of adopted policies.

To conclude, we observe significant variation in the aggregate analysis of the policy volume, not only across IOs, but also over time. There is neither a uniform trend, nor a completely random variation over time. The variety of patterns suggests that more than one factor is at play in explaining the decision-making capacity of IOs.

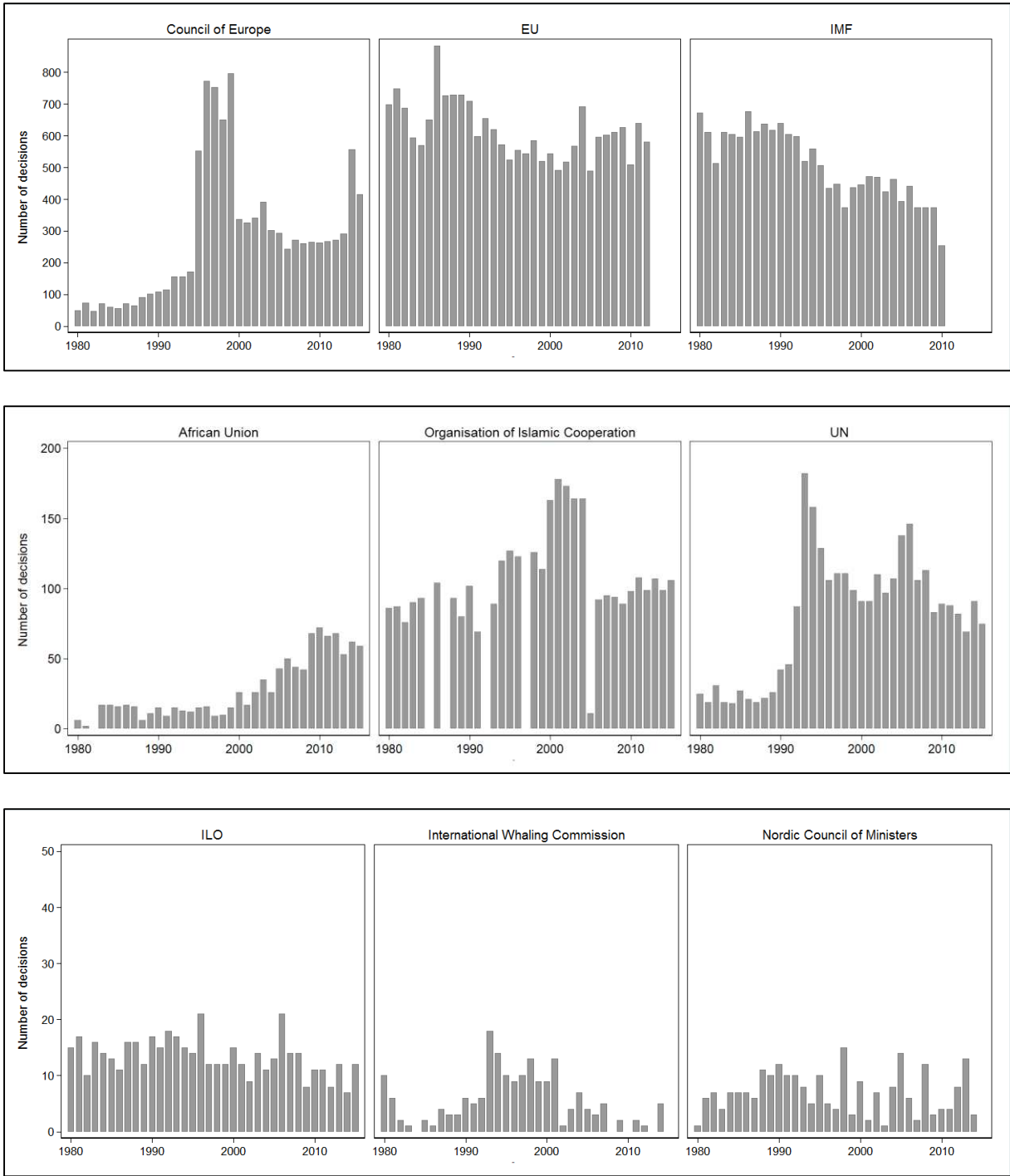


Figure 1: Annual decisions, nine IOs, absolute numbers

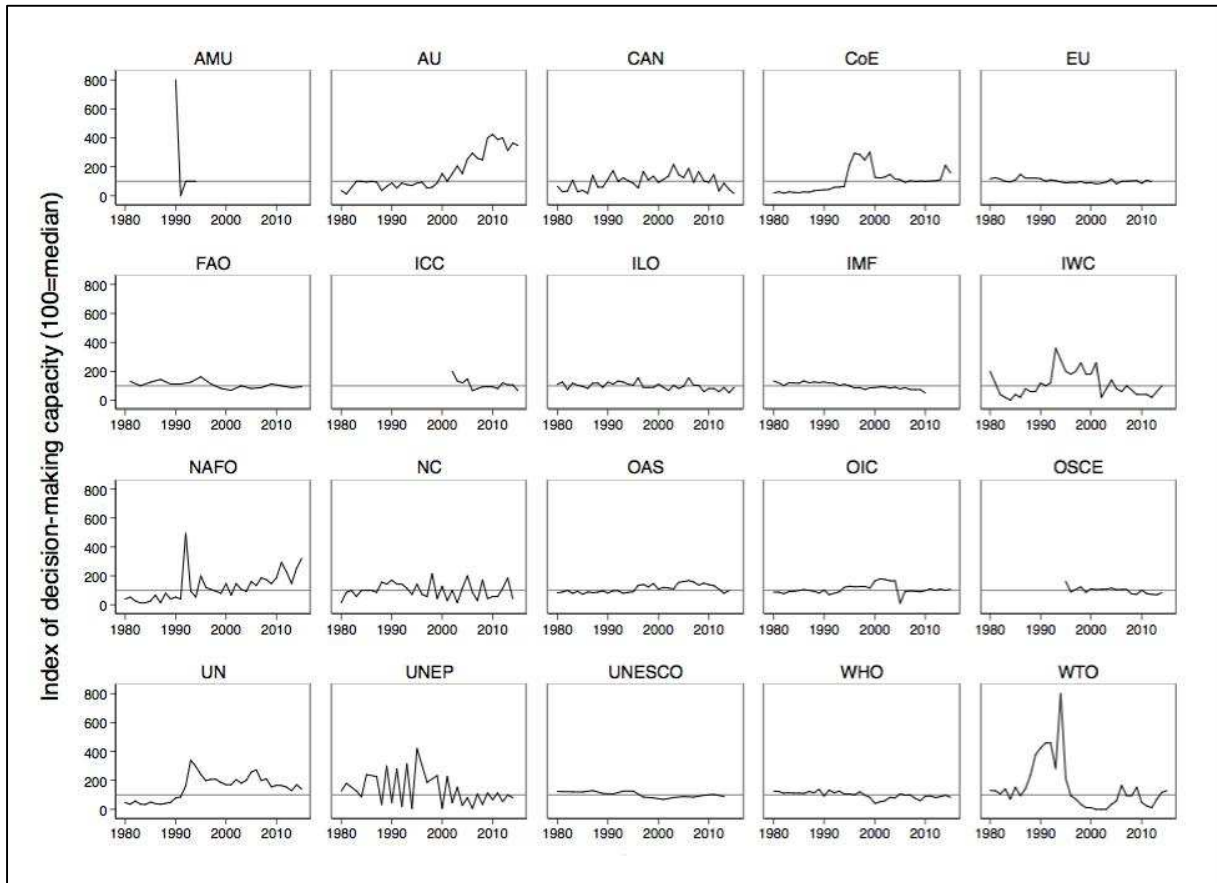


Figure 2: Annual decisions, 20 IOs, standardized (100 = median of individual IO)

Explaining Decision-Making in International Organizations

We test our hypotheses on the decision-making capacity of IOs on the basis of a multivariate regression analysis. The main dependent variable represents the number of annual policy outputs. Since the distribution of this variable is left-censored, and the standard deviation of this count variable exceeds the mean (see Figure A.1), we apply a negative binomial regression model. To compensate for the differences across IOs, we use IO dummies and a variable for the budget of an IO. The dummy variables represent IO-specific effects on the policy volume, and the budget figures represent the size and mandate of an IO. In addition to this first model,

we directly assess the effects of change in core independent variables on changes in the number of policy decisions (see Table A.2). The latter is operationalized through a dummy variable based on the percentage change in policy output with the previous year as the basis. We focus on negative effects expected from changes in the core independent variables, and specify two dummy variables. The first captures downward change that exceeds 10 percent, and the second downward change that exceeds 20 percent. We then assess the effect of change over time, using varying time lags.

We operationalize the number of actors (H1) in IOs by the number of member states in a given year. We use data on membership from the COW-IGO dataset for the years between 1980 and 2010 (Pevehouse, Nordstrom, and Warnke 2004). We update this data to 2015 and adapt it to our sample. The presence of non-state actors is operationalized on the basis of an index of formal access for non-state actors to IOs (Tallberg et al. 2013). We use the Transaccess data set (Sommerer and Tallberg 2016), with data at the IO level and for the relevant decision-making body.

Hypothesis 2 on preference heterogeneity is operationalized in three different ways. First, we use the voting pattern of national delegates in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) as predictor of preference heterogeneity among member states of an IO. The more similar member states of an IO vote in the UNGA, the more homogenous their preferences are assumed to be. We use the updated data on the dyadic affinity scores from Voeten (2013) and aggregate the information on the basis of our IO membership data. The affinity scores have been criticized, mainly because voting on unbinding GA resolutions might not represent a country's true preferences. To obtain more robust results, we add two additional indicators, based on factors known to influence state preferences. We use data on bilateral trade among the member states of an IO, weighted by the overall trade flow of each pair of countries (Barbieri and Keshk 2012). When we aggregate this data at the IO level, we get information on how important trade

relations among IO members are, and interpret a high share of bilateral trade among IO members as an indication of preference homogeneity. In addition, we use an indicator for the domestic regime type among member states. For this purpose, we calculate the standard deviation of Polity IV scores for all member states (Marshall, Gurr, and Richards 2015). The lower the standard deviation of an IO, the more homogenous member state preferences in that IO are assumed to be.¹

The third hypothesis on decision rules is operationalized on the basis of data from Blake and Payton (2015) on the voting rules in IO decision-making bodies. These authors distinguish between unanimity, majority and weighted majority. Since we do not have a theoretical justification to internally rank majority and weighted majority, we transform their data to a dummy on consensus vs. majority rules. We complement the information for IOs that were not included in their original sample.

Finally, we add three control variables. As mentioned above, IO budget is expected to represent the mandate and scope of an IO. The data is drawn from Tallberg et al. (2014). In addition, we control for the politicization of an IO (Zürn et al. 2012). Policy output could be positively or negatively affected by an IO being in the public spotlight. We use an indicator that captures how often IOs are named in leading global newspapers (Tallberg et al 2014), assuming that more references are similar to high public attention. Finally, we control for the influence of powerful states among IO members. We build a dummy for IOs that have at least one major power. We follow the operationalization of major power used in the COW dataset, and add regional powers for the period after 1989 (see Cline et al. 2011). To represent major power dominance, the indicator scores 1 if either only democratic or only non-democratic major powers are present. We add an alternative indicator for the presence of competing major powers that can lead to deadlock of an institution, like the UN Security Council during the Cold War.

¹ Note that high scores on the affinity variable and the trade variable indicate homogeneity, whereas high values on the regime type variable stand for heterogeneity.

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
		All variables	No dummies		Interaction		Alternative variables
Number of MS	-0.010 [0.002]**	-0.012 [0.002]**	-0.011 [0.003]**	-0.013 [0.002]**	-0.013 [0.002]**	-0.020 [0.005]**	-0.009 [0.002]**
IA Number				0.026 [0.013]*			
MS*Unanimity						0.014 [0.008]	
IA Number							
MS*Affinity MS							
Non-state access, IO	0.346 [0.188]	0.327 [0.183]	0.948 [0.174]**	0.207 [0.189]	0.300 [0.179]	0.324 [0.175]	
Non-state access, body							0.590 [0.130]**
Affinity, MS	2.646 [0.584]**	1.824 [0.582]**	2.192 [0.567]**	1.392 [0.623]*	0.805 [0.792]	0.747 [0.867]	2.382 [0.526]**
IA Affinity					2.347 [1.135]*		
MS*Unanimity							
Bilateral trade, MS	1.335 [1.209]	0.241 [1.203]	0.957 [1.198]	0.664 [1.255]	0.094 [1.207]	0.155 [1.203]	-0.337 [1.317]
Regime type, MS	-0.066 [0.021]**	-0.080 [0.020]**	-0.035 [0.023]	-0.097 [0.022]**	-0.090 [0.021]**	-0.087 [0.020]**	-0.074 [0.020]**
Unanimity	2.261 [0.620]**	2.199 [0.612]**	-0.815 [0.306]**	0.669 [0.981]	0.396 [1.075]	2.311 [0.612]**	2.101 [0.544]**
Media coverage		0.036 [0.031]	0.033 [0.042]	0.037 [0.031]	0.021 [0.031]	0.034 [0.030]	0.032 [0.030]
IO budget		0.212 [0.108]*	0.056 [0.058]	0.249 [0.112]*	0.247 [0.110]*	0.193 [0.108]	0.224 [0.109]*
Major power		-0.707 [0.196]**	-0.382 [0.169]*	-0.416 [0.238]	-0.654 [0.191]**	-0.770 [0.202]**	
Competing major powers							0.445 [0.218]*
N	350	350	350	350	350	350	350
Wald	321.34	335.56	106.79	340.45	333.5	354.04	406.32
Log-Likelihood	-1469.97	-1462.72	-1536.66	-1460.76	-1460.57	-1461.39	-1456.67

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; 1 year lag; *xtbreg* with *Stata14*; Except for Model III, IO dummies included but not displayed.

Table 1: Negative binomial regression of IO annual policy output, 1980-2015

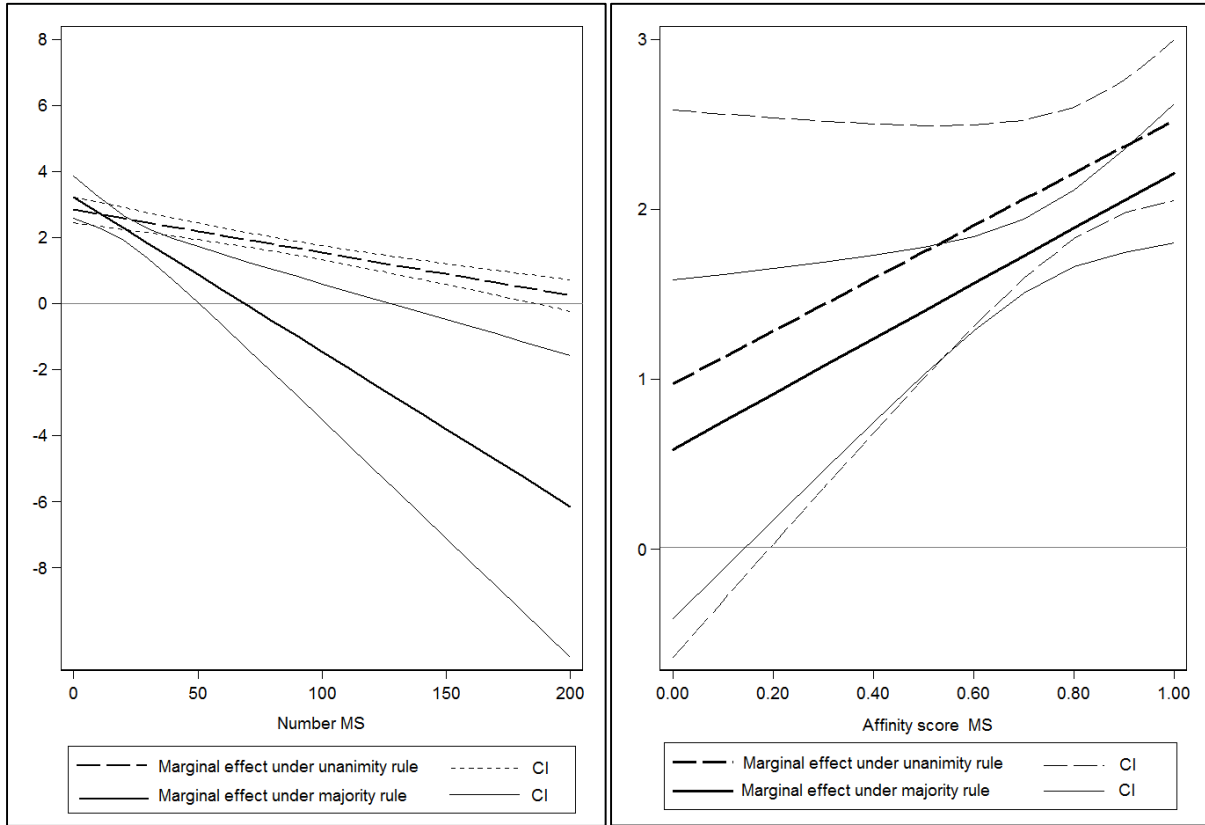


Figure 3. Interaction effects number of member states and preference heterogeneity with decision rule

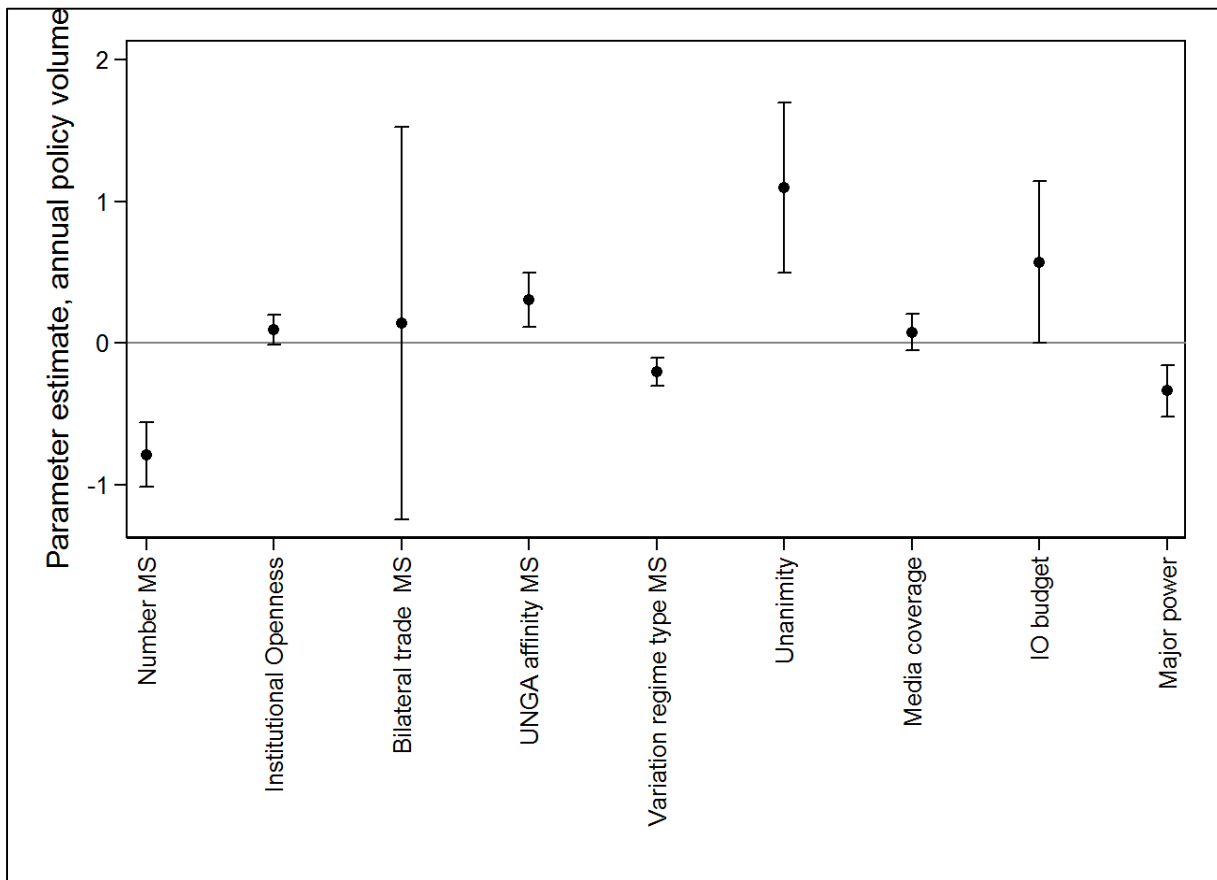


Figure 4: Marginal effects on IO annual policy volume, 1980-2015

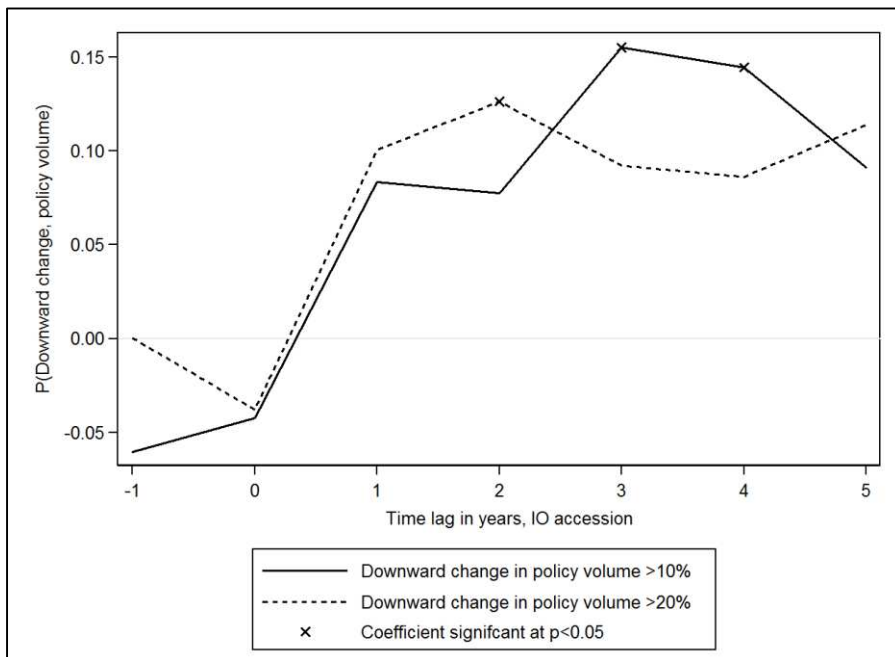


Figure 5: Effect of member state accessions on downward change in IO annual policy output

In Table 1, we present the results of seven regression models. Model 1 starts with an estimation of all indicators that refer to our hypotheses. We continue by adding control variables, with IO dummies (Model II) and without (Model III). In addition, we estimate interaction effects (Model IV-VI) and control for two alternative indicators (Model VII).

The regression analysis lends support to our hypothesis H1a on the effects of the number of member states in IO decision-making. The more member states an IO has, the lower the annual volume of policy decisions. This effect is robust in all constellations presented in Table 1. Since it turned out to be one of the strongest in our model (see marginal effects of Model 2 in Figure 4), we look more closely into this effect.

First, we assess if accessions of new member states to an IO have expected downward effects on policy output in subsequent years. Figure 5 plots the results of additional models including accession time lags varying from -1 to +5 years (See also Table A.2). The figure reveals that the positive effect of accession on downward change is growing with an increasing time lag. It is at its strongest two years after access if the downward turn in policy output is very strong (-20 percent compared to the previous year), and three to four years after accession if the downward turn in policy output is somewhat weaker (-10 percent).

Second, we consider interaction effects between the number of member states and the other two core independent variables. The interaction with the variable on decision rules is significant (Model IV). Together with the left part of Figure 3, it highlights that, contrary to the theoretical expectation, the negative effect of a large number of member states is stronger when decision-making bodies are governed by majority voting. This suggests that decision-making is more difficult when member states need to coordinate a large coalition to organize a winning majority. The interaction with the variable on preference heterogeneity is not significant (Model VI).

The analysis does not support hypothesis H1b on the effects of non-state actors. Contrary to the rationalist expectation, this variable has a positive effect on the annual volume of policy decisions. However, the results are not significant, unless we use an alternative version of this variable that specifies the access of non-state actors at the body level, rather than the IO level.

Regarding hypothesis 2, our analysis, as expected, finds evidence for a negative effect of preference heterogeneity on the decision-making capacity of IOs. The indicator based on voting patterns in the UNGA is positively correlated with the number of adopted policies. Since this predictor is the strongest among the three indicators for preference heterogeneity (Figure 4), we also test for an interaction with decision rules. Again, we obtain a significant interaction term. The sign of the interaction term and the pattern presented in the right part of Figure 3 illustrate that, as expected, the preference heterogeneity matters more for decision-making capacity when policy output is adopted through consensus. Likewise, a second indicator of preference heterogeneity, differences in domestic political regimes in an IO, is significant. The third indicator, based on the bilateral trade share among IO member states, is not significant.

The results are mixed as regards hypothesis 3 on decision rules. At first glance, the results from Table 1 and Model I-III suggest that unanimity decision-making has an independent positive effect on policy output, contrary to the theoretical expectation. But since the coefficient shrinks and loses its significance once we control for interactions, we interpret this as only weak support for the existence of an independent effect. Instead, the most interesting effects of decision rules are those obtained in the interaction of this variable with the number of member states and preference heterogeneity, as reported above.

As can be expected from the substantial differences in policy volume across IOs, the IO dummies have the strongest explanatory power in our model. If we take them out (Model III), we explain much less variation. Yet it should be noted that our principal results on the two core

independent variables – number of member states and preference heterogeneity – remain even if we do not compensate for differences across IOs through IO dummies.

Turning to the control variables, IO budget is positively and significantly correlated with the decision-making capacity of an IO. This suggests that well-funded IOs are more capable of developing and adopting policy output. The level of politicization of IO does not have a significant effect on decision-making capacity. Likewise, we find little support for the realist assumption that dominance by a powerful state would have a positive effect on IO decision-making capacity. In contrast, we get a negative and significant coefficient that indicates higher policy volume when no major power is involved. Likewise, and contrary to the expectation of deadlock, we find that IOs with competing major powers tend to have higher decision-making capacity (Model VI). However, since this variable is highly correlated with IOs having a global reach, it is difficult to interpret how important power per se is for this result.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to offer a first, systematic analysis of the decision-making capacity of IOs. Based on a dataset of policy output in 20 IOs over the time period 1980-2015, we have evaluated what factors best explain variation in IO decision-making. We conclude that IOs' decision-making capacity, in all its complexity and variety, can be surprisingly well explained through a parsimonious rationalist model privileging three aspects of the decision-making setting: the number of member states, the heterogeneity of their preferences, and the rules that govern policy adoption. We have shown that the number of member states matters in the aggregate, but also that accession of new member states has distinct effects on policy outputs in subsequent years. Likewise, we have demonstrated that the level of preference heterogeneity

within IOs matters, and that this factor interacts with decision rules in predictable ways. In contrast, we have found no support for realist assertions that hegemony paves the way for cooperation, or for constructivist claims that rationalist attention to preferences and numbers is misplaced.

These findings carry broader implications. The decision-making of IOs merits attention because of its relevance to the effectiveness and legitimacy of IOs. Scholarship suggests that IO decision-making capacity is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for IOs to be effective in problem-solving (Miles et al. 2002; Young 2011). Likewise, research suggests that IO decision-making capacity has consequences for the perceived legitimacy of IOs (Buchanan and Keohane 2006; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015). Unless IOs succeed in adopting policy aimed at solving the transnational problems societies confront, they will fail to generate public support and be of limited value in combatting environmental degradation, intrastate conflict, financial instability, human-rights abuse, and other challenges.

As this research agenda develops, three data limitations in the approach of the existing paper should be addressed. First, overtime data on decision rules is necessary for more nuance in this variable, and to assess if changes in this variable, just like changes in the number of member states, have predictable effects on policy output in subsequent years. Furthermore, if we could disaggregate the policy output of IOs that only produce one communique or declaration per meeting, this would permit an expansion of the sample to the full 36 IOs in the broader data gathering project. Finally, better information on the quality, rather than quantity, of the policy output would be useful. Does it affect the findings of this paper if we control for the bindingness of IO policy, the targets of IO policy, the issue orientation of IO policy, and the types of cooperation problems addressed through IO policy?

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Annex

Table A.1 Sample of International Organizations

	IO name	Decision-making body
CAN	Andean Community	Commission
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union	Council of Heads of State
CoE	Council of Europe	Committee of Ministers
EU	European Union	Council of the EU
FAO	Food & Agriculture Organization	Conference
NAFO	Northwest Atlantic Fishery Organization	Fisheries Commission
IMF	International Monetary Fund	Executive Board
IWC	International Whaling Commission	Commission
NC	Nordic Council	Council of Ministers
AU/OAU	African Union	Assembly of the Union
OIC	Organization of Islamic Conference	Ministerial councils
OSCE	Organization for Security Cooperation Europe	Permanent Council
OAS	Organization of American States	General Assembly
UNESCO	UN Education, Scientific, & Cultural Organization	General Conference
UN	United Nations	Security Council
WHO	World Health Organization	World Health Assembly
WTO/GATT	World Trade Organization	General Council
ILO	International Labor Organization	General Conference
ICC	International Criminal Court	Assembly of State Parties
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program	Environment Assembly / Governing Council

Table A.2 Logistic regression of downward changes in IO annual policy output

	Downward change policy volume > 10%			Downward change policy volume > 20%		
	Lag 1	Lag 2	Lag 3	Lag 1	Lag 2	Lag 3
Accession to IO	0.084 [0.061]	0.077 [0.060]	0.155 [0.069]**	0.101 [0.071]	0.126* [0.074]	0.092 [0.074]
More TNA access	0.915 [2.640]	4.880 [2.603]	-2.342 [2.972]	4.202 [2.769]	2.668 [2.746]	0.273 [2.945]
Less affinity MS	-3.644 [7.504]	-4.141 [7.499]	-4.304 [7.420]	0.493 [8.560]	21.347 [10.669]**	4.087 [8.645]
Less bilateral trade	38.544 [30.131]	26.793 [24.844]	-12.989 [20.619]	11.621 [24.479]	2.048 [21.174]	-19.930 [20.898]
More variation regime type	0.569 [0.514]	0.405 [0.504]	0.491 [0.555]	-0.226 [0.649]	-0.228 [0.632]	0.606 [0.594]
Constant	-0.485 [0.401]	-0.549 [0.402]	-0.617 [0.411]	-0.687 [0.418]	-0.380 [0.417]	-0.446 [0.414]
N	346	346	344	346	346	344

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$ Logistic regression of downward change in annual policy volume (xtlogit). IO dummies included but not displayed.

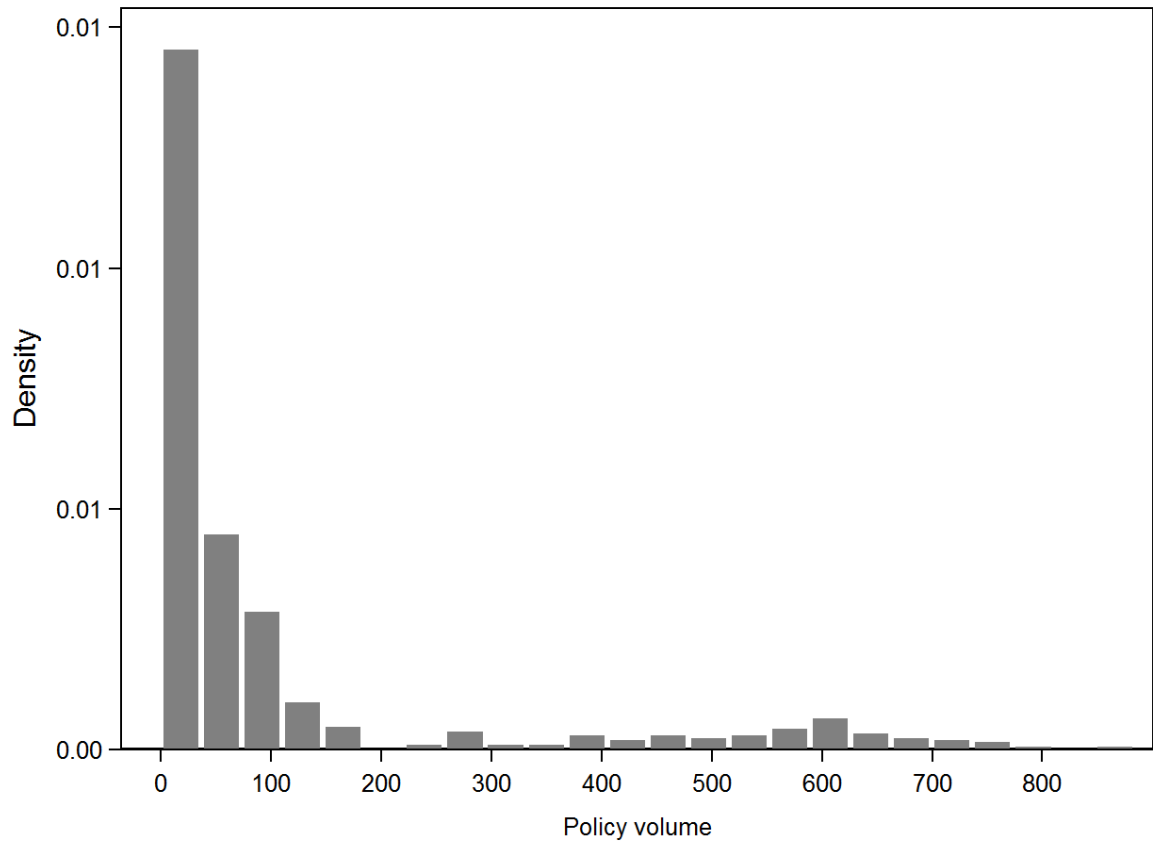


Figure A.1 Distribution of Annual Decision over time