

Building A More Inclusive, People-Centered Multilateralism: The Role of Survey Research

Richard Wike

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Recent calls by scholars for more multi-stakeholder approaches to international cooperation are a welcome effort to make international politics more inclusive. Nevertheless, even these proposed approaches sometimes ignore or downplay one very important stakeholder: ordinary citizens. Public perception that multilateralism and global governance are dominated by elites, and therefore reflective of elite priorities, is one factor driving populism and political resentment around much of the globe. Unless this trend is reversed, international organizations will increasingly lose legitimacy, and people will increasingly lose faith that international cooperation can effectively address the problems they care about most.

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To address this challenge, multilateral institutions need to make international cooperation more inclusive and people-focused. As part of a more inclusive and consultative approach to decision making, these multilateral institutions should consider employing survey research. Scholars, researchers, and practitioners have demonstrated that studying public opinion can be an effective way to amplify and include public voices. Below I outline a proposal for multilateral institutions such as the UN and G20 to incorporate survey research into their annual cycles, providing ordinary citizens with a more robust voice in multilateral conversations about key international issues.¹

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The Democratic Deficit

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The coronavirus pandemic, climate change, a global economic crisis, cybersecurity and digital privacy, and many other challenges over the past few years have highlighted the need for stronger and more enduring multilateral solutions to the many global problems. Survey research generally shows that publics around the world broadly support the principles of international cooperation and believe in the values and objectives that guide multilateral institutions. However, these same surveys find that many ordinary citizens feel distant from multilateral organizations and uncertain about the ability of these organizations to deal effectively with global challenges. At a time when international

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cooperation is badly needed, publics often lack confidence that multilateral institutions can 40
deliver such collaboration. If leaders and organizations are going to successfully mobilize
public opinion to back multilateral approaches, they will need to show that they are
listening to citizen voices and that multilateral efforts can have a real impact on everyday
lives.

Public opinion surveys by organizations such as the Pew Research Center, 45
Edelman, and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs highlight the degree to which publics
around the world broadly support the ideals of international cooperation (Wike and
Poushter 2021). For example, across 34 nations surveyed by Pew Research in 2019, a
median of 65 percent said nations should act as part of a global community to solve 50
problems, with majorities or pluralities expressing this view in nearly every country
surveyed across sub-Saharan Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, Latin America, and
the Middle East, as well as the United States and Canada. A 2020 Pew Research survey
among 14 of the top 20 donor countries to the United Nations found that a median of 58
percent across the nations polled said they believe nations should take other countries’
interests into account when making foreign policy, even if that means making 55
compromises, rather than acting purely in their own national interest (Bell et al. 2020).

Most of those surveyed in 2020—in the early months of the COVID-19 outbreak—
also believed more international cooperation could have mitigated the effects of the
coronavirus pandemic. A median of 59 percent across the 14 nations believed cooperation
with other countries would have reduced the number of infections in their own country, 60
while only 36 percent said that no amount of cooperation would have reduced infections.

Survey research has also generally found that international publics have positive
views about multilateral institutions. A 2021 Pew Research study found largely positive
attitudes toward the United Nations in advanced economies. Across the 17 publics
surveyed, a median of 67 percent expressed a favorable opinion of the UN. At least half of 65
those polled in 15 of the 17 publics rated the organization favorably, and in Sweden, Italy,
Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, and South Korea and Canada, seven-in-ten or more
gave the UN a positive review (Fagan and Moncus 2021).

However, while people see multilateral organizations in a positive light, they often
question whether those same organizations really listen to their needs or are effective in 70
their actions. In the 2020 Pew survey, majorities in every country praised the UN’s
promotion of human rights and peace. But far fewer, and in some cases only minorities,
said the UN cares about the needs of ordinary people or deals effectively with international
problems.

Climate change is a good example of an issue where there are strong doubts about 75
the effectiveness of international cooperation. A 2021 Pew Research Center survey,
conducted a few months before the COP26 conference in Glasgow, found that a median of
only 46 percent across the 17 publics polled said they are confident that actions taken by
the international community will significantly reduce the effects of climate change (Bell et
al. 2021). A median of 52 percent said they were not confident these actions will reduce 80
the effects of climate change.

Many also see multilateral organizations as part of an international system that does
not serve their interests. For instance, a five-nation 2018 Bertelsmann survey highlighted
the link between views about globalization and attitudes toward multilateral institutions
(Tillman 2018). Bertelsmann found that respondents in Argentina, Germany, Russia, the 85

United Kingdom, and the United States who believe they have not benefited from globalization were less likely to be supportive of international cooperation and organizations.

And of course, it is not just average citizens who voice these complaints—scholars, writers, activists, and policymakers on both the right and left commonly criticize multilateral organizations for being unaccountable, unresponsive, and dominated by global elites. Critics contend that multilateral processes typically lack the transparent deliberation and mechanisms for consent that characterize well-functioning political systems. 90

More broadly, concerns about the health of multilateralism fit into a broader pattern of concern about the state of politics around the world, as frustrations with aspects of globalization have helped fuel a populist tide that has exacerbated a global “democratic recession” (Diamond 2015), as well as a decline in the health of the international order (Ikenberry 2020). Some scholars believe the roots of the populist wave are primarily economic (Gold 2020), while others emphasize a “cultural backlash” against demographic changes and increasing social liberalism (Norris and Inglehart 2019). While both economic and cultural factors surely play a role, researchers have also identified explicitly political factors, such as corruption and the perception that most politicians are disconnected from ordinary citizens (Wike and Fetterolf 2018; Wike and Fetterolf 2021; Foa 2021). Angry at out-of-touch political elites, many citizens have lost confidence in institutions and turned to populist leaders, parties, and movements. 95 100 105

These political dynamics often take place at the national level, but there are also clear implications for international politics and multilateral organizations. If anything, since these institutions lack direct accountability to voters and in many ways are more distant from ordinary citizens, multilateral institutions are more vulnerable to populist suspicions, and indeed such institutions are regularly the target of populist rhetoric. Unless these trends are reversed, international organizations will increasingly lose legitimacy, and people will increasingly lose faith that international cooperation can effectively address the problems they care about most. 110

To combat populists, nationalists, and isolationists, proponents of international cooperation must consider new ways to bolster the legitimacy of multilateral organizations. One path would be to build and institutionalize processes that are more inclusive and people-centered. To help achieve this goal and address the trust gap between ordinary citizens and international policy elites, multilateral institutions should consider employing and institutionalizing survey research to better understand public opinion on key global issues. Scholars, researchers, and practitioners have demonstrated that survey research can be an effective approach for amplifying and including public voices. In his 1995 Presidential Address to the American Political Science Association, for instance, Sidney Verba (1996) argued that when survey respondents tell pollsters their views, they are engaging in a form of political participation, and that surveys can essentially provide an important tool for representation. When done well, surveys can help ensure that the beliefs and opinions of ordinary citizens are heard in debates about important political, economic, and social topics. 115 120 125

In the U.S. and other wealthy democracies, public polls have become an integral component of politics, and even in non-democratic countries, survey research is increasingly common. And, in addition to its role in domestic politics, polling has become a common feature of international affairs. Today, organizations like the Pew Research 130

Center, the Gallup Organization, Ipsos, YouGov, and others routinely conduct cross-national surveys exploring public opinion on key issues around the world. These efforts are complemented by academic projects such as the World Values Survey and the various regional “barometer” polls, including the AmericasBarometer, Latinobarómetro, Afrobarometer, Arab Barometer, Asian Barometer, and others. The global growth and spread of market research—as well as political, economic, social, and health surveys, over the past two decades has enhanced the development of research infrastructure in nations around the world, including middle- and lower-income countries. In the vast majority of nations, there are now firms or institutions capable of conducting high-quality work. The Gallup World Poll, for instance, regularly conducts surveys in more than 160 countries.

Of course, authoritarian nations pose particular challenges for survey research. In such nations, there may be topics that respondents do not feel comfortable discussing or that research organizations do not feel comfortable exploring. And in some non-democratic nations, the legal and regulatory environment creates barriers that make survey research difficult. Despite these challenges, important survey projects are regularly conducted in non-democracies, including the three G20 nations categorized as “authoritarian” in the Economist Intelligence Unit’s 2021 Democracy Index: China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia (Economist Intelligence Unit 2022).

Today, the increasing availability of global and regional surveys allows researchers, journalists, activists, business leaders, policymakers, and the informed public to have a portrait of what people around the world think about major global challenges and the issues that affect their lives. These studies help fill the information gap about international politics in the same way domestic polling helps fill an information gap about domestic politics providing data on the opinions of everyday citizens. This kind of information is especially valuable in world affairs, where debates are often shaped by diplomats, business leaders, scholarly experts, journalists, and other elites. All of these groups have a lot to add to discussions about key global issues, but international conferences and elite conversations—and the international organizations that regularly convene them—can be out of touch with the priorities and opinions of the general public. Survey research can help ensure that ordinary citizens are not left out of these important conversations.

At the same time, it is important to remember that surveys have limitations, and that even the best studies will never fully uncover the depth, nuance, and complexity of public opinion, or the motivations and myriad factors that influence an individual’s thinking about politics and society. And survey research is not a substitute for institutional processes that, when they work effectively, help ensure that public sentiment is represented in official deliberations at various levels of governance. However, survey research can inform key audiences about the views, priorities, and values of everyday citizens across the globe.

Making the multilateralism organizations more inclusive

Even many strong supporters of international cooperation believe current multilateral organizations need greater inclusivity and transparency. Former Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) Secretary General Angel Gurría has written about how multilateralism must become more inclusive, arguing that multilateral institutions should allow a wider range of stakeholders, including actors from

civil society, to have influence over their decision making (Gurría 2019).

As Gurría notes, distrust of multilateralism is tied to distrust of globalization: “dissatisfaction with various aspects of globalization – tax avoidance and evasion, local blight associated with offshoring or foreign competition, surges in migration, increased market concentration and the emergence of globally dominant firms – has fed a suspicion that the system is rigged to favor the interests of those with money and power and contributed to an erosion of trust in governments in many parts of the world and fueled protectionism, populism and unilateralism.” 180

In addition to policymakers like Gurría, many prominent researchers and scholars have called on multilateral institutions to become more inclusive. For instance, Homi Kharas, Dennis Snower, and Sebastian Strauss have called for multilateral agreements to be more clearly focused on the public interest, and to more clearly promote opportunities for empowered citizens to live “meaningful and prosperous lives in sustainable, inclusive and thriving communities” (Kharas et al. 2020). 185 190

In their vision of “effective multilateralism,” Alan Alexandroff, Colin Bradford, and Yves Tiberghien have described how multilateral efforts need to involve a wide variety of sub-national actors, such as foundations and private and public corporations, as well as cities, regions, and provinces (Alexandroff et al. 2020).

Several writers have argued that civil society organizations (CSOs) deserve a stronger voice within multilateral organizations and efforts, including the G20. Helmut Anheier and Stefan Toepler have argued for the establishment of an international civil society task force that would help repair what they characterize as a “strained relationship” between civil society and the G20. The task force would, among other things, work to identify appropriate regulatory models of state-civil society relations and effective models for the role of CSOs in multilateral and intergovernmental systems (Anheier and Toepler 2019). 195 200

Ronja Scheler and Hugo Dobson describe the C20, a group of civil society organizations and leaders, one of several “engagements groups” that supports the G20, as the “worst resourced” G20 engagement group, placing it at the bottom of the group hierarchy (the Business 20, which has the most resources, sits atop the hierarchy, according to Scheler and Dobson) (Scheler and Dobson 2020). 205

Scheler and Dobson advance a multi-stakeholder approach to international cooperation that would place non-state actors such as CSOs and private companies at the center of cooperative efforts. “Multi-stakeholder governance,” according to the authors, “assumes that an effective governance of global commons like climate, digitalization, and global health requires cooperation among various groups of stakeholders constituting state and non-state actors.” 210

As Scheler and Dobson note, their multi-stakeholder approach has some similarities with Andrés Ortega, Aitor Pérez, and Ángel Saz-Carranza’s idea of “inductive governance,” which emphasizes a “bottom-up mode of organizing global collective action” (Ortega et al. 2018). To Ortega and his co-authors, inductive governance “responds to a change in the way governments interact, and to the new weight gained by IGOs, sub-state units, cities, hybrid organizations and entities, businesses such as multinational corporations, NGOs, trade unions, foundations and philanthropic organizations, and citizen movements, experts in academia and think tanks.” Ortega, Pérez, and Saz-Carranza also believe international governance needs to be more responsive to public opinion, and one of 215 220

the advantages they list for inductive government is that it would make governments more accountable to the public.

While Ortega, Pérez, and Saz-Carranza and others emphasize the importance of public support for the legitimacy of multilateralism, there have been relatively few efforts to systematically integrate public opinion within multilateral decision making. However, embedding public opinion more thoroughly into multilateral processes – along with efforts to incorporate civil society and other non-state actors – could lead to more informed decisions and help boost the legitimacy of multilateral institutions.

There are many ways the public’s voice could be more robustly represented in multilateral debates over key international issues. Below I outline an approach that would feature survey research, and I also address some practical issues associated with implementing this approach, including funding and the need for an effective communication strategy.

Incorporating survey research

NGOs, governments, private companies, and academic researchers regularly use surveys to explore public opinion on key international issues. Many of these surveys examine public opinion in a single nation, however a growing number of cross-national research projects also examine major international topics. Still, few are well-integrated into the timeline, agenda, and communication priorities of multilateral institutions.

One recent example of a multilateral institution incorporating survey research into its work is the UN75 campaign. To commemorate the organization’s 75th anniversary, in January 2020 “the UN launched a yearlong, global initiative to listen to people’s priorities and expectations of international cooperation” (UN 2021). The initiative included a variety of research streams, including public opinion surveys in 50 countries conducted by Pew Research Center and Edelman, and a voluntary one-minute survey which was available on the UN’s website as well as various other platforms. The findings provided insights regarding attitudes toward the principles of multilateralism, as well as people’s immediate and long-term issue priorities. The results were featured on a number of different platforms in advance of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and a final report on the findings was released in January 2021. The UN75 initiative is a good example of a multilateral institution using survey research to help shape its agenda and outreach efforts.

The UN could consider ways to institutionalize this research process within the annual cycle leading up to UNGA. A relevant example is the Munich Security Conference, which in recent years has included survey research findings in its annual Munich Security Report (Bunde et al. 2022). The report is typically released a few days before its annual conference on global security issues, which consistently brings together a variety of high-profile policymakers and other influential figures in international affairs. Other multilateral organizations and institutions, including the G20, should consider similarly incorporating survey research. The G20, for example, could incorporate an annual survey of publics in G20 member states (plus some number of additional countries, depending on funding and feasibility), and the results could be released in advance of the G20 summit. High-quality cross-national surveys require a considerable amount of planning, which could be done in conjunction with the host nation, although this kind of effort could benefit from the

establishment of a permanent G20 secretariat. Other organizations such as the OECD and the Paris Peace Forum could also consider institutionalizing survey research as a means for obtaining input from ordinary citizens about their priorities and concerns. The UN75 research had support from the highest levels of the organization, and to be truly successful, any effort to more formally institutionalize survey research would need similarly strong support from key leaders. 270

In order to provide high-quality data for decision makers and to have credibility with key audiences, this type of cross-national survey should meet high methodological standards, including methodological transparency, a rigorous translation process, and probability-based nationally representative sample designs that will ensure that all demographic and ideological groups within society are accurately represented. 275

The topics for such a survey could vary depending on the focus of the multilateral convening. For instance, a survey tied to the G20 could explore issues related to the thematic priorities the host nation has identified for that year. However, certain issues related to major global challenges and international cooperation could be included each year, providing annual trends for tracking changes in public opinion on key global issues. Additionally, the research design should provide opportunities for respondents themselves to make clear their issue priorities, assuring that the issue framework reflects public sentiment rather than being determined in a purely top-down manner. 280 285

To complement the public opinion surveys, polls could also be conducted among elite groups to identify the priorities and viewpoints of important stakeholders in the policy making process, as well as to illuminate differences between policy elites and ordinary citizens. A current example of this type of survey is being conducted by the Brookings Institution's Global Economy and Development Program, which, as part of a project on the future of multilateralism, is polling experts around the world on the key challenges and potential reforms of the multilateral system (Dervis and Strauss 2021). 290

Another example is the Teaching, Research and International Policy program (TRIP) at William & Mary, which regularly surveys International Relations (IR) faculties about key international issues, as well as issues within the discipline of political science. TRIP has often coordinated with Pew Research Center to include questions on its surveys that are parallel to those included on Pew Research surveys in the United States and around the world, allowing for a comparison of public and scholarly opinion. Data from 2020, for instance, revealed that International Relations (IR) scholars were more concerned than ordinary citizens in 14 advanced economies about climate change, but relatively less concerned about terrorism (Poushter and Fagan 2020). 295 300

Similarly, Pew Research Center has collaborated with the OECD to survey attendees of the annual OECD Forum, asking them several questions that are also asked of general publics around the world, providing an opportunity to compare citizen views with those of a group highly engaged in policy making. A 2020 study found that both OECD Forum attendees and ordinary citizens in 14 advanced economies were supportive of multilateral approaches to foreign policy, although support was especially strong among Forum attendees (Wike et al. 2020). 305

A regular program involving surveys of public and elite opinion could provide useful data and analytic insights that could inform decision making by political leaders and others involved in multilateral processes., The gaps between elites and the publics they claim to speak for will be difficult to close, but these types of research programs may help 310

illuminate, and perhaps shrink, these gaps which have played role in fueling political frustration across the globe. 315

High-quality survey research can be expensive, of course, and identifying funding sources would be crucial to the success of this endeavor. While international organizations may be able to provide some support for these projects, much of the financial support would likely have to come from foundations, wealthy individuals, or corporations, or perhaps public sources such as national governments or the European Union. And to be effective, these approaches would need strong partnerships with the institutions in charge of multilateral convenings, such as the UN or a G20 host nation (or at some point potentially a G20 secretariat). 320

Conceivably, a single well-funded research project could establish partnerships with multiple multilateral institutions, providing an ongoing and evolving portrait of citizen sentiment to inform policy makers and others engaged in international cooperation on key issues. 325

A comprehensive communications and dissemination strategy for making multilateral processes more inclusive would be crucial for success. Again, the UN75 initiative offers a possible model – the results of the survey research, as well as other research efforts such as public dialogues, were important components of the UN’s communications around the 75th anniversary of the organization, including outreach priorities such as publications and social media. The findings were also incorporated into the communications of key leaders, including the UNGA address of Secretary General António Guterres. For the G20, one possibility would be to feature the findings at the various engagement group summits, as well as the G20 leaders’ summit. 330 335

Policymakers would be a key audience, but it would be equally important to reach journalists, think tank representatives, researchers, and the engaged public. The ultimate goal is to use the techniques of survey research to represent and amplify citizen voices in important international debates about the issues that affect their lives. 340

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Author biography

Richard Wike is director of global attitudes research at Pew Research Center. He conducts research and writes about international public opinion on a variety of topics, such as America's global image, the rise of China, democracy, and globalization. He is an author of numerous Pew Research Center reports and has written pieces for The Atlantic, Foreign Affairs, Financial Times, the Guardian, Politico, Foreign Policy, CNN, BBC, CNBC, and other online and print publications. Wike received a doctorate in political science from Emory University. 415