Debating the International Legitimacy of the G20: Global Policymaking and Contemporary International Society

Steven Slaughter
Deakin University

Abstract
There have been growing debates about the legitimacy and the future of the G20 (the Group of Twenty) leaders forum despite this forum playing a prominent role in response to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. While states within the G20 assert the legitimacy of the G20, states outside the G20 actively question this forum’s legitimacy. This article contends that while the G20 is important to contemporary global governance and efforts to create a common framework of rules for global capitalism, this ongoing debate demonstrates that the legitimacy of the G20 is fundamentally uncertain and problematic because the G20’s membership and connection to existing forms of multilateralism remain contentious. This article contends that G20 leaders need to consider these issues in light of the prevailing expectations of states in contemporary international society.

Policy Implications
• Given the scale and complexity of global problems and the large number of states and International Organisations (IOs), the G20 is going to be an important forum for timely global agenda setting and decision making at an executive level.
• However, the G20 faces a range of challenges in attempting to develop and sustain its legitimacy. Importantly, legitimacy is not an abstract concept, as it derives from the prevailing norms and institutions in international society.
• Since the emergence of the G20 there have been ongoing debates about the legitimacy of the G20 in international society, where it is clear that considering the views of nonmember states and the relationship of the G20 to existing forms of multilateralism are important.
• Consequently, consideration ought to be given to measures to strengthen the legitimacy of the G20, including stronger connections between the G20 and core multilateral bodies like the UN, as well as developing avenues of interaction between the G20 and the public in its member states, as well as transnational NGOs and business interests.

In 2008, the debate in the international community about how to deal with the emerging economic storm focussed on how we could evolve a coordinated, global policy response in a manner which both maximised the political legitimacy of that response, while at the same time maximising the effectiveness of that response (Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs (Rudd, 2011a)).

There has been a growing debate about the legitimacy and the future of the G20 leader's forum, despite this forum playing a prominent role in coordinating the international response to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. In the light of this crisis, the G20 was elevated to being the preeminent forum for economic diplomacy in place of the smaller G8 leader's forum and the G20 finance ministers and central bank governors' forum (G20 FM/CBG). The G20 leader's forum consists of the leaders of 19 economically powerful states, the EU president and the heads of a range of IOs. Importantly the G20 and preceding forums of the G system were established outside the normal protocols of multilateral international law and the United Nations (UN), as well as having no constitution, ongoing secretariat or budget and thus no capacity to act independently of its mem-
The emergence of this selective and self-appointed G20 forum has given rise to a range of questions about its legitimacy. States within the G20 assert the legitimacy of the G20 on the grounds that the global economy requires effective governance and that their member states comprise the bulk of the world’s economic activity and population. However, states outside the G20 actively question this forum’s legitimacy on the grounds that the views of many states are not considered.

The significance of this debate is important to the future of the G20 and global governance because it indicates that while the question of effectiveness is crucial to global governance, effectiveness alone is not enough to sustain global forms of governance and capitalism. The debate about the status of the G20 emphasises that key political questions of membership and of the representation of states outside the G20 are also important for global governance to be just and effective in the long term. This article contends that while the G20 is important to contemporary global governance, the ongoing debate demonstrates that the legitimacy of the G20 is fundamentally uncertain and problematic. Questions remain whether the membership of the G20 and its efforts to consider the views of non-member states are internationally acceptable and whether the G20 is consistent with existing forms of multilateralism. Furthermore, this article contends that the leaders of the G20 do not have a free hand in determining what legitimacy means, as any process of legitimation requires communication with the world’s states which may possess different expectations of rightful global governance. As such, this article perceives legitimacy to be a social variable which rests on a constructivist (and English school) understanding of legitimacy with respect to the prevailing expectations and deliberations of states in contemporary international society. Legitimacy is not an abstractly aesthetic notion of what G20 leaders claim is palatable, but rather, is a deeply political question which involves ongoing political justification and communicative interaction between those states within and beyond the G20 membership. Since the formation of the G20 we have seen international debates as to not only whether this forum is legitimate but also as to what legitimacy means in the contemporary context.

The issue of legitimacy will be considered both in theoretical terms of how the prevailing expectations of states relate to the way the G20 attempts to draw all states into a framework of rules for global capitalism, as well as the policy related question of what the G20 member states should do to promote the legitimacy of the G20. This article will first briefly explain the importance of legitimacy in global governance with respect to the G20. Second, the issue of membership and the representation of states outside the G20 will be explored. Third, the G20 will be considered with respect to extant forms of multilateralism. Fourth, the relationship between the G20’s effectiveness and legitimacy will be briefly explored. The paper will conclude by considering the consequences of these issues for effective global governance.

**The G20 and legitimacy in global governance**

There has been a considerable amount of recent scholarship about the issue of legitimacy in respect to IOs and official forms of global governance. The constructivist line of argument demonstrates that global governance is not just a strategic outcome of states but is also informed by prevailing normative and political expectations of legitimate political action. According to constructivists, legitimacy is an ‘inherently social’ phenomenon where there is a sense than an actor or institution is considered to have the right to govern and has political support from the relevant constituency (Reus-Smit, 2007, p. 171). While such a condition is social in that it involves communication and dialogue it also relates to politics and ethics in the sense that:

for an actor or institution to be judged legitimate, its identity, interests, or practices must resonate with values considered normative by other actors within their realm of political action. This process of legitimation is inherently political, as it involves the complex interplay of idiographic, purposive, ethical, and instrumental goals and practices (Reus-Smit, 2007, pp. 171–172).

The process of legitimation involves ongoing dialogue and justification between the actors involved. Such dialogue normally refers to political questions in regards to ‘rightful membership’ – are the relevant actors included, as well as ‘rightful conduct’ – do the actors accord with prevailing normative expectations of procedural and substantive action (Clark, 2005, p. 25). Indeed talk about international legitimacy is evidence of a social context often referred to as an international society (Clark, 2005, p. 23; Bull, 1995). Such a society is a historically formed complex of institutions, norms and moral aspirations which entail the mutual recognition between states of the principle of sovereignty and other mutually determined values and institutions, which also increasingly includes transnational actors and dynamics (Buzan, 2004).

Legitimacy matters because if an institution lacks legitimacy then the institution does not have support by the relevant constituencies and thus the institution’s authority is compromised. A lack of legitimacy of an institution
can produce a range of social costs which can adversely affect the power, effectiveness and efficiency of an institution (Reus-Smit, 2007, p. 163–165). Such costs at a minimum can include the institution or its supporters having to spend political and economic resources to explain or articulate its policies which can slow and weaken the effective operation of the institution. At worst it can mean that the institution in question becomes irrelevant or dissolves. However, the question of who are the relevant actors or constituency for an IO or forum is not given in world politics. Much of the issue of legitimacy relates to the question of what community or society is an IO meant to be acceptable and appropriate to (Clark, 2003, p. 95). We could speak of the international legitimacy of an IO with respect to the states in international society or public legitimacy with respect to the public of states that create and support the organisation in question and with respect to the transnational networks of NGOs and social movements. The importance of public legitimation has risen in significance in light of the growing intensity of transnational forms of media and activism evident in the public protests against the WTO, IMF, G8 and G20 (Clark, 2003, p. 95). While public legitimacy is important given the rise of transnational forms of media and activism, it is often the case that transnational activism actually exacerbates the differences of political opinion of the formal state negotiations inside an institution, rather than have an autonomous impact. Consequently, international legitimacy is crucial given that states are nearly always the actors that formally create, resource and implement the policies of IOs and diplomatic forums.

Nevertheless, it is not automatically clear what standards of legitimacy apply to the formation and operation of the G20. Consequently, the broader context of international society as an ongoing form of social interaction is important in developing the appropriate standards of legitimacy. However, constructivist scholarship can be critiqued for being underspecified about what constituencies and agents matter in particular contexts, because not all constituencies of legitimacy are of equal political importance in influencing prevailing normative expectations (Symons, 2011, p. 5). In respect to international legitimacy, it is the case that the support of states varies in respect to the political power of its individual member states. Clearly powerful states that are members of the G20 have a different level of importance in legitimating the G20 than states external to the G20. However, states outside the G20 are important because the G20 is attempting to develop policies and understandings which have a global significance and draw all states into a common framework of rules for global capitalism. Furthermore, the expansion of the G8 to the G20 indicates that questions of membership are an active and ongoing issue in respect to the legitimacy of the G20 in a context where there are a range of emerging powers within international society. The formation of the G20 demonstrates that the G8 was not deemed legitimate in terms of membership given the emerging power and wealth evident in the rise of China, India and other emerging economies. The G20 also demonstrated that existing economic institutions – including the G8 – were deemed inadequate to be able to address the Global Financial Crisis and manage globalisation (Cooper, 2010, p. 748). However, this is not to say that power simply constitutes legitimacy, because when states do concur and establish a standard of practice like multilateralism, this can significantly influence debates about legitimacy, as we will see later in this article.

The legitimacy of the G20 is also framed by the various roles that this forum performs. The most prominent function the G20 plays is the role of being a ‘crisis committee’ in the form of an executive level forum for ‘crisis diplomacy that can swiftly coordinate international responses to urgent global economic problems’ (Cooper, 2010, p. 747). This is evident in practical terms in that the G20 and the G8 before 2008 have been rising in significance within the structures of global governance and have played the coordinating role of being the ‘plate spinner’ which acts as a strategic forum that directs other bodies like the WTO, IMF and World Bank (Dobson, 2007, p. 89). This is apparent in the way the G20 has become the central body for responding to the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 and 2009, especially in the form of G20 efforts to coordinate new financial resources from its member states to the IMF in 2009 (Cooper, 2010, p. 741). In addition to providing the background policy coordination, the G system also provides an executive level forum to discuss the immediate implications of ‘common systemic problems’ (Beeson and Bell, 2009, p. 67). Indeed the G20 FM/CBG emerged as a response to the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, and the development of the G20 world leader’s forum was a response to the Global Financial Crisis. This demonstrates that the G system is adaptable to changing dynamics in the global economy. The development of the G20 also shows a willingness to include emerging economies that are rising in economic and political significance (Cooper, 2010, p. 743).

The G20 also plays a role of being a significant formal and informal agenda setting function of economic policy of member states. Aside from reacting to emergencies in the global economic system, the G20 and the G8 summit are significant sites for consensus formation by leaders of the world’s powerful states and heads of the main IOs. In particular, while the G system attempts to coordinate policies among member states it also inculcates states and institutions into ideologies and discourses which include capitalist and neo-liberal principles (Beeson and Bell, 2009, p. 69). In this view the ‘G’ system of
institutions is a powerful hub of agenda setting and consensus building involving the leaders of powerful states. Questions remain as to the power of dominant states like the US in the G20, but the broadening membership of the G20 points to new forms of cooperation paralleling the dominance of the US and transnational capitalism (Beeson and Bell, 2009, p. 81–82, see Wade, 2011). In addition to addressing the policy implications of economic interdependence, the G8 and the G20 also played a role in addressing public expectations and fears regarding globalisation (Bayne, 2000). As such, the G system’s management of global integration encompasses both the policy coordination of its political leaders and efforts to publicly legitimise economic globalisation.

Another (more contested) role that the G20 and the G8 perform is in addressing a range of noneconomic issues ranging from terrorism, global warming, and global health. The G20’s function here has been limited by the G system’s focus on economic issues, the reluctance of great powers to broaden deliberation and the overall urgency of efforts to address the Global Financial Crisis. For instance the G8 meeting in Gleneagles in 2005 demonstrated a willingness to engage with global poverty and climate change – as well as an unplanned discussion of terrorism due to the London bombings that preceded that meeting. The 2010 G20 meeting in Seoul also demonstrated a willingness to engage with the issue of global poverty in the form of the ‘Seoul Development Consensus for Shared Growth’. Both of these occasions demonstrated the significant influence that the host leader has in respect to setting the agenda. However, the potential of the G20 to address an array of issues broader than promoting global capitalism, or coordinating responses to economic crises, points to the potential significance of creating and sustaining a body that plays a coordinating role in global governance that extends to social issues and promotes public goods in world politics (Hampson and Heinbecker, 2011, p. 305). Managing such social issues appears to be growing in importance not just because such issues have economic implications, but because addressing these social issues is crucial to the legitimacy of the G20 and global governance more broadly.

These roles demonstrate the importance of the G20 and a sense that the G20 fulfils a glaring gap in global cooperation. That is, global governance requires an executive level forum that promotes high level policy coordination which can address and adapt to the world’s economic and social problems. Despite this pressing and widely acknowledged need for such a forum to exist, there are significant challenges facing the legitimacy of the G20.

The G20 and representation

A central issue for the legitimacy of a forum like the G20 is the political issue of representation and rightful membership. This includes questions about the appropriateness of the members, the appropriateness of the process whereby members are selected and how the views of nonmember states can be represented within such a forum. In practice, responses to these issues with respect to the formation of the G20 were controlled by the states inside the G7/8. Considerable internal debate within the G8 was also given to considerations of promoting regional representation of emerging economies around the world – although the issue of African representation was a difficult ‘issue’ (G20 History Study Group, 2007, p. 21). As such, the member states of the G20 defend the legitimacy of this forum on the grounds that it comprises 90 per cent of GDP, 80 per cent of world trade and 66 per cent of the world population: ‘the G20’s economic weight and broad membership gives it a high degree of legitimacy and influence over the management of the global economy and financial system’ (G20, 2011). These claims to legitimacy have not been wholly accepted by states external to the G20.

The legitimacy of the G system of forums have always been challenged with attempting to be representative despite being self-appointed, possessing no criteria or procedure for membership and having a small enough membership to be effective. This dynamic was noted by US president Barack Obama (2009) when he said at the 2009 G8 meeting:

One point I did make in the meeting is that what I’ve noticed is everybody wants the smallest possible group, smallest possible organization, that includes them. So if they’re the 21st largest nation in the world, then they want the G21, and think it’s highly unfair if they’ve been cut out... So I think we’re in a transition period. We’re trying to find the right shape that combines the efficiency and capacity for action with inclusiveness.

The impulse to be small enough to be effective is driven by those inside the G system who hold that the significance of these summits is due to the informality of deliberations and the relatively small size of the forum. However, this leads to representative deficits. The drive to be considered legitimate by the wider international society is also driven by the significance of states outside the forum and the broader impact of the political problems and crises. Clearly when there are problems emanating from outside the membership of the group then the need to expand representation becomes apparent. Consequently, debates have surrounded the selectivity of the G20 since its inception.

Across the history of the G system we can see efforts to broaden representation or membership. Indeed, the expansion from the G7/8 to the G20 FM/CBG in 1999...
demonstrates this. According to the G7 finance ministers, the G20 FM/CBG was created ‘as a new mechanism for informal dialogue in the framework of the Bretton Woods institutional system, to broaden the dialogue on key economic and financial policy issues among systematically significant economies and to promote cooperation to achieve stable and sustainable world growth that benefits all’ (G7, 1999). This was focused upon on including the economically significant countries in the agenda setting context of the G7/8’s consideration of financial issues. The lead up to this development demonstrated considerable debate about the appropriate size of such a group. In the months leading up to the eventual formation of the G20 finance ministers both a group of 22 states (the G22 or Willard group) and a group of 33 states (G33) were explored. Both of these two groups were considered to be ultimately too big, so the G20 was eventually agreed upon (G20 History Study Group, 2007, pp. 15–16). The inclusion of the EU president in the G8 since 1981 and to the G20 also gives some measure of representation to the smaller European states.

However, membership is not the only way to increase forms of representation. The G system has explored a range of mechanisms to offer some form of representation to non member states. For instance, Tony Blair invited Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa to attend some of the proceedings of the 2005 G8 summit. This invitation became known as the G8 + 5. This invitation was institutionalised at the 2007 meeting in what became known as the ‘Heiligendamm Process’ in light of the location of the meeting at the behest of the summit chair German chancellor Angela Merkel (Cooper and Bradford, 2010, p. 4). Furthermore, since 2000 it has been a standard practice at meetings across the G system to invite various states to particular sessions of G8 and G20 summits. These invitations can be seen to be a way of increasing international representation as well as mediating differences of opinion between member states in respect to formally enlarging the G8 or the G20. Another more recent way of increasing international representation in these forums is to facilitate existing members to represent themselves but to also act to represent other states who are not members. For instance some G20 states are involved in ‘outreach’ programs whereby member states of the G20 consult with non G20 members in their region in order to enable a form of proxy representation (Cooper and Bradford, 2010, p. 11). For instance, the Australian government indicates that ‘Australian officials conduct regular outreach meetings with our regional neighbours to ensure that the decisions of the G20 reflect the needs of our region’ (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2011).

Another call for representation has been emerging in respect to the G20. In 2010, a group of 28 small and middle powers lead by Singapore called itself the Global Governance Group or 3G and asked to have their voices systematically considered and represented in G20 summits (Global Governance Group, 2010). Here it is the case that rather than members of the G20 offering to represent outside states, there has been a request by outside states to have their views actively considered. In their 2010 statement, they indicated support for the G20’s existence, but claimed:

However, the actions and decisions of the G20 have implications beyond its membership. Many member states have felt some impact from such decisions. Unlike the UN, where we all have a voice, the G20 process is closed. This has understandably given rise to some concerns from the UN membership (Global Governance Group, 2010).

This group supports and recognises the importance of the G20 despite having clear concerns with the G20’s capacity to make decisions without their consent or input. In this sense, they indirectly legitimise the G20 as an important arena of influence. In their statement, they claim the G20 process can be improved by ensuring that the G20 consults with non G20 members ‘through regular and predictable channels’, by including the UN secretary general in preparatory meetings for G20 summits, by regularly including leaders of regional groupings and where regional groups cannot represent particular states, enable these states to participate in relevant G20 meetings (Global Governance Group, 2010).

Legitimacy depends upon ‘rightful membership’ and is difficult to develop and maintain if an institution does not attempt to be representative. We can see clear signs that the G system has attempted to include states beyond its membership in various ways. This demonstrates a clear and socially reflexive understanding of the importance of legitimacy on the part of the leaders from member states and some outside states. However, representation is also influenced not just by formal or informal inclusion but also by whether such membership and inclusion is consistent with historically and institutionally formed expectations of how cooperation is mutually organised. In particular, the 3G proposal reflects a clear reverence for the UN system. As such, questions have also developed in respect to whether the G20 is consistent with the principle of multilateralism and existing forms of multilateral cooperation.

The G20 and multilateralism

The relationship between the G20 and extant forms of multilateralism points to the importance of both rightful membership and conduct. Rightful membership refers not just to the subjective dispositions of individual states
but also the more contextual question of whether membership can be defended in terms of the prevailing norms and institutions of contemporary international society. To the extent that multilateralism is influential in contemporary international society, the procedural legitimacy of selective forums like the G8 and G20 may be politically problematic. However, G system forums are considered by the member states to be complementary with multilateralism or indeed, a form of multilateralism itself. Indeed, the G20 leaders at the 2008 Washington Declaration called for continued forms of multilateralism: ‘as we move forward, we are confident that through continued partnership, cooperation, and multilateralism, we will overcome the challenges before us and restore stability and prosperity to the world economy’ (G20, 2008). Conversely, there are some observers contending that multilateralism may not be the solution to the world’s pressing economic and social issues. Some observers are extolling the virtues of selective forums for managing economic and social integration (Hampson and Heinbecker, 2011, p. 301). Richard Haass (2010) has argued for ‘elite multilateralism’ to parallel other forms of multilateralism and Moisés Naim (2009) has coined the term ‘minilateralism’ to denote such narrower forums which involve the ‘smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem’. Consequently, questions revolve around whether minilateralism is a new phenomenon in world politics and whether this conception is antagonistic to multilateralism in contemporary world politics.

Of course, these questions turn on what is meant by the term multilateralism. There is considerable debate in regards to what in fact multilateralism is and what significance multilateralism has within contemporary world politics. Since the late 19th century and especially the 20th century we have seen the rise of multilateralism as the general principle of how diplomacy, international cooperation, and international law have been organised. As an organising principle, the term multilateralism demonstrated a meaning in world politics which meant more than cooperation between multiple states. Important here is John Ruggie’s distinction between a ‘nominal’ and a ‘qualitative’ understanding of multilateralism (Ruggie, 1993, p. 6). According to the nominal definition, any institutionalised cooperation between three or more states counts as multilateralism. However, the qualitative view of multilateralism as advanced by Ruggie suggests that multilateralism only exists when three or more states are bound in a similar way by common principles of conduct. That is, that the states involved are bound in a reciprocal manner. Ruggie (1993, p. 11) claims that multilateralism is an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalised principles of conduct: that is, principles which specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard to the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence.

In this view, what is important is the reciprocal nature of the recognition to negotiate cooperation and the collective development of mutually binding rules (Hampson and Heinbecker, 2011, p. 300). However, while some scholars assert that multilateralism stems from American hegemony after the Second World War, the problem with this observation according to Ruggie (1993, p. 18) is that there were signs of multilateralism before 1945. The argument on the part of Reus-Smit (1999, p. 152) is that multilateralism reflects liberal moral values that were increasingly endorsed by western states in the late 19th century even though the US played an important role in accelerating multilateralism after 1945.

Consequently, multilateralism in this stricter sense has become the dominant principle of international cooperation. Even more importantly, multilateralism has been institutionalised in various forms of international organisation as evident in the framework of the UN and a variety of other international regimes and organisations (Ruggie, 1993, p. 7). Thus, the qualitative definition stresses the reciprocal and inclusive nature of multilateral institutional arrangements – which in particular have become to be associated with the UN system. While multilateralism has been the predominant principle for international cooperation, it has not been the only practice or overruled power politics. Clearly, great powers have been given privileged positions within multilateral bodies - evident in the permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for instance. However, the qualitative definition also shows why great powers are wary of multilateralism – because they get bound by the same set of principles as all other states in a given agreement. Indeed, it is often suggested that ‘great powers rarely make great multilateralists’ because ‘multilateralism implies a relationship based on rules rather than power’ (Patrick, 2002, p. 9). In a sense this animosity demonstrates the way that the principle of multilateralism in the qualitative sense actually exists and foreshadows the possibility of placing restrictions on all states and thereby introducing the real probability of restraint on the powerful states. This leads powerful states to favour bilateral arrangements or being at the centre of hub and spoke ‘coalitions of the willing’ rather than multilateralism.

The claim that the G20 is multilateral is therefore problematic within prevailing understandings of multilateralism and legitimacy in international society. It appears that the development of the G20 has elevated concerns about representation and inclusion with regards to
global decision making, as evident in the concerns of the 28 members of the Global Governance Group. Another high profile criticism of the G20 came from the Norwegian foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre (2010) when he claimed that the ‘G20 is a grouping without international legitimacy – it has no mandate and it is unclear which functions it actually has’ and he went to say:

The G20 is a self-appointed group. Its composition is determined by the major countries and powers. It may be more representative than the G7 or the G8, in which only the richest countries are represented, but it is still arbitrary. We no longer live in the 19th century, a time when the major powers met and redrew the map of the world. No one needs a new Congress of Vienna.

The concern of a Congress of Vienna like body where powerful states make rules for the rest is what haunts the procedural legitimacy of the G20. This concern and a corresponding respect for multilateralism is also evident in the 3G group’s statement that ‘the UN is the only global body with universal participation and unquestioned legitimacy’ (Global Governance Group, 2010). There are also calls within the UN system that the UN and not the G20 should have greater responsibility for economic issues – for example via the creation of an Economic and Social Security Council within the UN (See Stewart and Daws, 2001). Furthermore, in 2009 the UN organised a multilateral consideration of the Global Financial Crisis in the form of the ‘Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development’ where the UN secretary general – and a great number of states – emphasise the importance of UN processes (United Nations General Assembly, 2009).

It must be said that though the existence of multilateralism is evident in a range of international arrangements and is influential in terms of contemporary international legitimacy, the practice of multilateralism is challenged by a range of historical and contemporary factors in world politics. One obvious challenge to multilateralism has been the ambivalence of great powers, especially from the US, most recently in light of the presidency of George W Bush and the sidelining of the UNSC in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Another challenge has been the ways the growth of civil society activism in world politics has put considerable outside pressure on multilateral bodies and negotiations. Indeed, the development of transnational coalitions of NGOs poses a considerable challenge to statist nature of multilateralism. The consequence of this impact is that the institutions that states have set up are not alone in making public decisions – they have to interact with NGOs and other transnational actors in order to be legitimate and effective. This suggests that multilateralism is undergoing a process of fundamental transformation (Langenhove, 2010). The last significant challenge to multilateralism is the cumbersome nature of multilateral negotiations. The awkward nature of multilateral efforts involving large numbers of countries to address climate change was highlighted at Copenhagen in 2009 and some observers are consequently arguing for international cooperation involving smaller numbers of participants (Naím, 2009).

As a consequence of these problems there have been calls for more selective forms of negotiation for international cooperation. Moisés Naím’s concept of ‘minilateralism’ is apposite here as it refers to smaller forums involving the powerful relevant states to address particular global problems. The development of the G20 – first as finance ministers meeting and more recently for executive leaders – is a high profile example of forums such as these. However, there are questions surrounding the originality of minilateralism compared with multilateralism. One key issue is that even though multilateralism has non reciprocal moments or elements – the formation of the UN charter was drafted by powerful states and then more or less imposed on smaller states – but these states were included in the discussions. However, more selective negotiations such as the G20 are defined not just about the smaller numbers of relatively powerful states. Importantly, these selective and informal forums are not based on formal international treaties. These selective bodies cannot sponsor forms of international laws and norms like the UN, they also have no stated mandate and do not have stated rules or procedure for membership. Selective forums like the G8 and G20 are also typified by less serious engagement with civil society than we see with respect to most contemporary multilateral IOs.

Consequently, if the prevailing qualitative conception of multilateralism rests on reciprocity we can observe that a term like ‘elite multilateralism’ is a contradiction in terms and that minilateralism rests upon a different institutional logic to multilateralism. We can observe that minilateralism rests upon overt vanguardism. This is where powerful states create and attempt to domestically implement a policy consensus determined in the selective forum before engaging other states and civil society actors in multilateral forums. The weight of power in the vanguard creates a consensus or policy platform which becomes the sine qua non that other countries find it difficult not to follow. The reason that this vanguardism occurs is due in large part with the cumbersome nature of contemporary multilateralism. As such, forums like the G20 do not initially engage in a multilateral fashion and as such lack the reciprocal and inclusive nature of multilateralism. This lack of engagement with multilateralism is a key aspect that undermines the legitimacy of the G20.
The G20 and effectiveness

The legitimacy of the G20 rests upon an international society informed both by multilateralism and the need to create flexible forms of governance able to be effective in stabilising global capitalism. There are indeed tensions between legitimacy and effectiveness. This tension is indicated by the then Australian minister for foreign affairs, Kevin Rudd (2011b):

> Some now argue for a G193 — to gain the perfect legitimacy of the total membership of the UN. But with perfect legitimacy comes equally perfect ineffectiveness in dealing with the complex, dynamic and potentially destructive beast called the global economy. Of course the alternative to the G7, the G20 and the G193 is the G0 — that is the effective collapse of any form of credible global economic leadership. For these reasons, the G20 is the best blend of legitimacy and effectiveness the international community has had so far in dealing with the great challenges of the global economy.

While the legitimacy of the G20 rests upon questions relating to appropriate representation and procedure, the G20 also needs to be effective in order to be internationally legitimate. In order to be able to justify its selective representation and its existence outside of extant forms of multilateral diplomacy, the G20 needs to be a forum that is able to marshal the power of its member states to address global problems and facilitate the delivery of global public goods in conjunction with states outside the G20. In this sense the ‘internal’ legitimacy of the G20 in respect to its member states is crucial to the existence and success of the G20.

Nevertheless, perceptions of effectiveness within broader international society are also important despite it being difficult to produce reliable impressions of where the G20 has been effective because the G20 is still in its infancy. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe if the debate about the legitimacy of the G20, and the need for flexible and effective global governance, will shift prevailing conceptions of legitimacy away from multilateralism towards a wider acceptance of selective and flexible forums. International debates regarding the G20 indicate that the G20 member states and most states are hoping that the G20’s decision making outcomes are effective, even though a commitment to multilateralism remains prominent. It is also the case that member states of the G20 are certainly concerned about how the G20 can be more effective. There are certainly signs that the G20 was active in respect to the Global Financial Crisis and produced decisions that coordinated the economic policy of member states in the sense that these states acted in rapid and coordinated fashion to promote economic stimulus packages (Hanson and Heinbecker, 2011, p. 304; Cooper, 2010). The G20’s record in respect to social issues is less well developed due to differences of opinion within the G20 over climate change and global poverty and the overarching impact of the Global Financial Crisis. While there are signs of activity in respect to the G20 being a ‘crisis committee’ there are many questions about the capacity of the G20 to be a ‘steering committee’ which enables action to prevent problems (Cooper, 2010). This leads us to consider some of the significant factors which influence the G20’s effectiveness in terms of producing decision making outcomes.

One requirement of effectiveness is the discursive influence of G20 outputs. In essence: how strongly do G20 declarations get followed in national policy and multilateral forums? If G20 communiqués and policy directions are not taken seriously then the G20 can be considered to be a ‘talk fest’ without serious influence. Again the decisive and coordinated response to the Global Financial Crisis determined in the G20 summits demonstrates an example of where the G20 policy coordination role is serious and effective. However, the question lurking in this success is the external effect of the seriousness of the crisis in disciplining states to act in coordinated fashion. In 2010, some observers noted that the coherence of G20 deliberation had weakened with the waning of the disciplinary influence of the Global Financial Crisis (Cooper and Bradford, 2010, p. 5). Furthermore, in other more politically contested economic issues – such as attempts to address the trade imbalances between member states – the G20 has not been as effective. Furthermore, it will be interesting to see if the 2010 ‘Seoul Development Consensus for Shared Growth’ gains any traction in policy making circles in the longer term. In any case, further research is required to trace the discursive influence of G20 decision making outputs.

Another requirement of effectiveness in respect to the agenda setting and decision making capacity of the G20, is the agency of G20 deliberations. Here the question is whether the G20 has the capacity to enable its member states to coalesce into a coherent voice. While the G20 is a forum for states, there are questions as to whether the G20 needs to have support staff and secretariat to better process the information that enters the decision making process. Across the history of the G system, this information and the overall agenda has been prepared by the host country, as well as by diplomats – also known as sherpas – before and during the summit with support from World Bank staff – a practice which is contentious according to some non G20 states (Wade, 2011, p. 370). However, given the increased complexity of issues and the increased number of ministerial and
leaders’ summits, there are questions whether the G20 needs some form of permanent presence. One possibility is to expand the development of working groups to marshal expertise and information about the technical issues that the G20 FM/CBG and the G20 address (Cooper and Bradford, 2010, p. 5). A more dramatic proposal discussed formally in recent years is the idea that the G20 needs a permanent secretariat to process information in regards to the issues it confronts.

A third requirement of effectiveness is whether the G20 has public legitimacy, especially in the form of public support in its member states and also from transnational NGOs and business interests. The G20 has offered few opportunities for public engagement from the publics of member states or from business leaders and civil society (Cooper and Bradford, 2010, pp. 11–12). It is the case that international legitimacy depends upon public legitimacy – it is difficult to conceive of member states of the G20 being able to domestically implement G20 derived policy coordination in a context of robust domestic opposition. Even public indifference might be a problem of ensuring that the domestic implementation is possible. One of the crucial issues facing the future of global governance and the G20 will be how the profile of the G20 can be raised in the public consciousness and how greater possibilities can be opened up for public input into the issues that the G20 and other IOs address.

Not only is it the case that it is difficult in contemporary global politics to develop legitimacy without interacting with business leaders and civil society in both national and transnational contexts, it is also the case that these groups are sources of information and knowledge that are increasingly important to global policy making. Furthermore, while the legitimacy of the G20 is important, the deeper issue with respect to the reasons the G20 was developed is that we are also discussing modalities to coexist with global capitalism in contemporary international society. However, legitimacy refers to the limits of power and the need for those in positions of power to recalibrate their institutions to prevailing normative expectations. As such, greater reference to multilateralism and the UN appear to be an important part of this debate.

Conclusions

This article has argued that selective forums like the G20 are essential elements of a system of global governance able to address the problems of global capitalism. Given the scale and complexity of global problems and the large number of states and IOs, the G20 is going to be an important forum for timely agenda setting and decision making at an executive level which also draws all states into a common framework of rules for global capitalism. Yet this article has also argued that the existence of selective forums such as the G20 raises a range of challenges in attempting to develop and sustain legitimacy. There have been a range of Gs in the international system including the G5, 6, 7, 8, 8 + 5, 20, 22, and 33. This reflects a necessary willingness to experiment with the complex alchemy of international legitimacy and effectiveness with respect to developing an executive level forum appropriate to emerging global challenges. Furthermore, as Kevin Rudd indicated, this search for legitimacy is also an effort to avoid a ‘G0’. However, this article has also argued that legitimacy is not an abstract concept and that we can see signs of international debate about the legitimacy of the G20 where states within and beyond the G20 are considering what forms of governance are acceptable.

The theoretical observation that stems from this ongoing debate is that while the legitimacy of the G system of forums has to be continuously reconsidered, there also needs to be greater consideration of the underlying normative and institutional underpinnings of legitimacy in contemporary international society. While not often captured in the cut and thrust of continuing forms of diplomacy, global capitalism and global governance, it is the case that these practices do not exist tabula rasa. Rather, they rest on a historically formed complex of norms and institutions of international society which influence the idea of legitimacy and which have given rise to a widely held – but not unproblematic – commitment to multilateralism. These issues in regards to the G20 point to the observation that the ongoing debate about the legitimacy of the G20 and the question of how the G20 can be effective are entwined. Consequently, there is no choice to be made between multilateralism and ‘minilateralism’. Both practices of governance are necessary for the prevailing multilateral modalities to coexist with global capitalism in international society. However, legitimacy refers to the limits of power and the need for those in positions of power to recalibrate their institutions to prevailing normative expectations. As such, greater reference to multilateralism and the UN appear to be an important part of this debate.

Consequently, the practical issue that stems from this analysis of the G20 is that member states will have to consider a range of measures to strengthen the legitimacy of the G20. First, stronger connections between the G20 and core multilateral bodies like the UN will be crucial. Making the UN Secretary General and perhaps the President of the General Assembly permanent members of the G20 will probably be crucial. Inviting a representative of other coherent regional multilateral groupings to join the EU may also be important. While the G20 does not necessarily challenge multilateralism as
the organising principle for global governance in the 21st century, the observation drawn here is that multilateralism has an enduring importance and efforts to connect the G20 to existing forms of multilateralism will be crucial. Second, greater attention will need to be given to developing the public legitimacy of the G20 in respect to developing avenues of interaction with the public of its member states, transnational NGOs and business interests. It is difficult to see how any organ in global governance can be legitimate or effective by wilfully ignoring public opinion. The ways that the G20 intersects with multilateralism and domestic and transnational publics will be a key issue for the future effectiveness of global governance able to address the problems of global capitalism.

References


Author Information

Steven Slaughter is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. His research interests include globalisation, global governance and international political theory.