Changes Underway and Challenges to Political Legitimacy

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Abstract

The article argues that the relevance of the question of political legitimacy, already high in the context of politics in general, is deepened by the changes and challenges underway in contemporary politics. As such the article reviews eight challenges and what they mean for the future of political legitimacy: the challenge of integration and disintegration; the economic and financial challenge; the geopolitical challenge; the normative challenge; the technological challenge; the globalization challenge; the crisis of democracy challenge; and the governance challenge.

Keywords Political legitimacy · Challenge · Governance · Globalization · Future of political order

1 Introduction

In the previous article I have alluded to how over the years I have come to make issues of political legitimacy a key aspect of my research agenda. This has led me to explore questions of legitimation in the context of Latin American authoritarian regimes, to touch upon matters of legitimacy of a more general nature in the framework of legal and political theory, and to refer to the problematic of political legitimacy at the international level, including in the environment of the United Nations.

Building on these considerations, in this second article I want to focus on some of the changes at play in the contemporary world, and on what they could imply for the future of political legitimacy. It is indeed important to identify and reflect on these changes considering that while they are not entirely new (they have been at work for some time), they have become particularly significant in recent years, since the early 2000s. In the process, they bring about challenges that are impacting political legitimacy, for example making it at the same time more problematic and more relevant, at the national and international levels. This is all the more the case since

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in this state of affairs, the fate of the national and international realms, and their respective legitimacies, get more and more intertwined. From this perspective, how these changes and challenges are going to be addressed in the coming years is likely to determine to a large extent the evolution of political legitimacy, and the connected issues of justice, nationally and internationally.

Among the changes and challenges underway, and their associated events and trends, I will highlight here the following eight: the challenge of integration versus disintegration; the financial and economic challenge; the geopolitical challenge; the normative challenge; the technological challenge; the reassessment of globalization challenge; the crisis of democracy challenge; and the governance challenge. I will unpack them in turn and, for each of them, allude to their possible meaning and implications for political legitimacy.

2 The Challenge of Integration and Disintegration

Arguably the challenge of integration and disintegration is the most generic and all-encompassing of the challenges, as are the changes, events and trends that come with it. Perhaps more than any other it is the one that seems to shape most the world of today and its unfolding future. It is at work in economics, geopolitics, norms and cultures, technology, the environment and other domains. In relation to this challenge, the objective is twofold. First, we have to make sure that disintegration does not prevail, at the national and at the international levels. But, second, we also have to make sure that the modalities of integration do not lead to a form of world-system that ultimately produces more exclusion (and therefore also dangers of disintegration) than (fair) inclusion.

As for the tendency toward integration, and the challenges it can entail, including for political legitimacy, we have to recognize that that it is one of the strong trends of the modern and, even more so, contemporary eras, in all of aspects of social life: economic, political, normative, cultural, etc. Needless to say, although globalization is not the only driving force behind this phenomenon, it is a major one. To be sure, globalization has not put an end to the relevance and specificities of local life, or of localized life. But the bonds and connections that the current modalities of globalization have established between societies have certainly led to a reorganization of a significant part of social life on a transnational basis that is much wider and deeper than in any previous context.[1] Four elements that are characteristic of the current form of globalization are a testimony to this reality. They are: its wide scope, such as the extensity of the global networks associated with globalization; its high intensity, like the intensity of global interconnectedness; its elevated velocity—think for

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[1] The current form of globalization is not the first and only one that has come to shape the world. It is simply the last wave of the long history of globalization. In the modern era, globalization, understood as the existence of transnational relations affecting the lives of millions of people within specific societies, has been at work for centuries. In particular, since the sixteenth century, we can identify three big moments of globalization: The Spanish moment of globalization; the British moment of globalization; and the American moment of globalization.

instance about the velocity of financial flows; think also about the rapidity of change in China, closely associated with globalization, in the past 40 years or so; and the depth of its impact. In this regard, although the economic dimension of globalization, which consists of various forms of international integration, including foreign trade, foreign direct investment, technological diffusion, etc., has captured most of the attention in recent years, contemporary globalization is a multi-layered phenomenon, involving security, normative, environmental and cultural dimensions, and it tends to affect and bring together most aspects of social life.

But equally important are the forces of disintegration. Not very surprisingly, they can also be viewed as in part a by-product of globalization and the frictions, pathologies, and disintegration, it has come to bring about. A key feature of globalization helps explain this negative impact, i.e., the fact that it produces winners and losers.[2] Like in the past, the current form of globalization has generated winners and losers, both within and among countries. Interestingly, the winners of the previous waves of globalization, in particular those linked to manufacturing industries, have somewhat become, at the country level and at the level of social groups within countries, the losers of the current form of globalization. This explains in part the sense of crisis that today exists in a number of Western countries, like in the US and, in Europe, for instance in the UK and in France. The other side of the coin is that the winners of the current wave of globalization tend to be the ones, once again at the country level and in terms of social groups, who had been losing in the previous waves of globalization. As China has been able to seize the opportunities offered by the present wave of globalization, it has benefited immensely from it (Milanovic 2016).

This is to say that although the current globalization was initially presented by its supporters as an entirely up-beat phenomenon, as a win–win process for everybody (remember the optimism of President Bill Clinton's presidency in the US in the 1990s), the reality has proved to be quite different. Like in the past (there is no wave of globalization that has not had the dual effect of generating winners and losers), there are countries and people who have gone up; and there are countries and people who have gone down. In the West, in Europe and in the US, the rise of populism is to some extent a result of this state of affairs, which amounts to national crises of legitimacy, in economic, political, social and even moral terms—crises that themselves could have a spill-over effect at the international level. For as Western powers have been able in the modern and contemporary eras to set the tone for legitimacy, nationally and internationally, it is quite possible that the difficult predicament in which they presently find themselves could have impacts for legitimacy not only at their domestic levels but in the international realm as well (Coicaud 2018, 2019).

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[2] Among the various waves of globalization throughout history, including the current wave of globalization, we can identify four rather consistent features: (1) each wave of globalization is built on a power situation, i.e. on a country being in a dominating situation. This is why each wave of globalization can be associated with a global power; (2) this global power is able to project its influence beyond its borders through two types of power: material power, which can be economic, military and political power; and immaterial or soft power, which can be ideas, norms, culture, etc.; (3) because globalization is the expression and projection of a power situation, globalization generates attraction and rejection, envy and resentment; and (4) globalization produces winners and losers.

3 The Economic and Financial Challenge

When it comes to the financial and economic challenge, two problems are prone to have major consequences for issues of legitimacy.

The first one is how to balance national sovereignty with the role of transnational actors? The 2008 financial and economic crisis has shown that transnational economic actors are now in a commanding position, at least in the West (in the US and beyond). The financialization of the economy, that started in earnest in the 1980s and gives an extensive role to financial markets, institutions and actors in national and international economies, itself facilitated by the revolution in information technologies, is at the same time the expression and the instrument of this situation. This evolution is especially troublesome considering that the agenda of many of transnational financial actors gives absolute priority to their interests (regardless of the costs to others) and, in order to reach their objectives, they resist the regulation of their activities (Boyer 2011). Even if this phenomenon is not that surprising, since it is part and parcel of an economic evolution in the context of which capitalism appears to be more and more concentrated on short-term profit and less and less concerned with the national sphere and considerations of common good, the fact that, probably more than in the past, it undermines, nationally and internationally, the sovereignty of the economic, political and legal powers of the state cannot be ignored.[3]

Relatedly, there is the second problem of the deepening of inequalities between rich and poor. To be sure, globalization may have produced a drop in global inequality between countries thanks to high growth in emerging countries and it may have served as a major source of development for them—China in particular. But within many countries, developed and developing, inequalities have grown tremendously, to the point that the growing disparity between rich and poor shows that the problem is not only economic and social, but also political, and as such undermines the fabric and sense of community, in developing as well as developed countries (Bourguignon 2012).

In the process, especially in the West, it is not only the legitimacy of the economic policies, if not the economic system as a whole and its unbalanced results, that ends up being questioned. It is also the legitimacy of the political actors and institutions that have allowed or made possible these evolutions. As alluded to above, in Europe and the US, the difficulties that democracies are encountering today are part of this story.

4 The Geopolitical Challenge

In recent years, two important geopolitical challenges have made headlines, and, once again, their impact on matters of legitimacy cannot be underestimated.

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[3] Unfortunately, more than ten years after the 2008 financial crisis it does not seem that the lessons of the crisis have been seriously learned and that the situation has drastically changed.

The first geopolitical challenge concerns the international redistribution of power. The unfolding changes in this area, with their possible consequences for the evolution of the international system and various aspects of legitimacy, while only emerging a few years ago, are now on full display. With the relative decline of the West (The US and Europe) and the rise of China,[4] which aspires to become a comprehensive power that is influential worldwide, the transformations looming on the horizon are likely to have a deep impact. To the extent that the West cannot pretend any longer to be the center, or the only center of the world-system, its capacity to dictate the rules of the game, to define what is legitimate and what is not, what is right and what is not, including in the various domains of international law, is likely to be significantly weakened. In this regard, probably much more than Japan yesterday (another emerging country a few decades ago) and certainly more than India today, China's evolution is arguably one of the keys to the future of the international system.

Despite the various challenges it is facing domestically (Coicaud and Zhang 2011) and its relative lack of diplomatic experience beyond the Asia region (although China is now acquiring global diplomatic experience very quickly) (Coicaud 2011), China is already positioned and increasingly positioning itself to have much influence on the evolution of international relations, including in international organizations. For example, in the past 20 years, the role and importance of China has significantly changed at the United Nations. In the 1990s, it was rather low key. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is much more active and visible. Among other areas this is notably the case when it comes to UN peacekeeping operations (Fung 2016). More recently, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is emerging as a major development in the remaking of relations among the countries and economies that it directly brings together and, perhaps, even beyond those. If this initiative is as transformative as it aims to be from the economic and geopolitical standpoints, it is likely to have regional and global political and normative consequences, including in terms of legitimacy.[5]

The second geopolitical challenge concerns terrorism. As such, it is as much an indication of the tense relationships, of the fault lines existing between dominating countries and those that have in the modern era traditionally been at the receiving end of their power, as an indication of problems of local governance in the countries where terrorism is at work. Starting with September 11, 2001, which truly brought about a series of actions and reactions[6] that have been unfolding and not receding

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[4] If the evolution of capitalism in the past decades has had a de-structuring effect of "de-sovereignty" in certain countries, in particular in the West, other countries have fully benefited from this evolution to strengthen their sovereignty and power nationally and internationally. More than any other emerging country this is certainly the case for China.

[5] Concerning China and the future of the international system, two key questions are: will Chinese economy continue to grow at a high speed? Can Chinese global economic influence be translated into legitimate global political influence?

[6] September 11, 2001 was itself in part a reaction to previous events and policies, in particular coming from the United States. In this perspective, one could argue that in a way September 11 was also a wasted opportunity for the United States. In the aftermath of September 11 there was little energy in America dedicated to reflection, including critical reflection and an attempt to understand how historically and

ever since, in the field of security and beyond, issues of terrorism are arguably today as acute as they were a few years ago. To be sure, with the defeat of ISIL in Iraq and the arrest and prosecution of their partisans, terrorism is somewhat on the defensive. Yet it cannot be said that the threat has disappeared. This is in particular the case considering that its root causes have not really been fully addressed, in particular in the Middle East and in Europe (Coicaud 2017a, b). Moreover, one of the regions where terrorism finds its most fertile ground, the Middle East, continues to be crippled by problems like authoritarian political regimes, failed states, high youth unemployment, and the rather destructive involvement of Western influence, factors which contribute to the perpetuation of regional instability and volatility, and make the quest for legitimacy all the more elusive. For this state of affairs, rather than facilitating compromise among parties at odds, which is one of the hallmarks of a situation of political legitimacy, internally and externally, is likely to nurture animosity among actors and make the achievement of a mutually recognized sense of legitimacy all the more unattainable.

5 The Normative Challenge

The normative challenge and the questions of legitimacy that come with it have many faces. But by and large they come down to issues of values, that is to the various values or systems of values at play and how to choose among them as sources of legitimacy. Interestingly, the way in which the normative challenge and the questions of legitimacy associated with it unfold around values tend today to be similar at the national and international levels (within and among countries). These national and international levels are more connected than ever before and they have the tendency to echo each other, including in how they face normative matters of legitimacy.

In this regard, it is now a feature of the national and international realms to both have to deal with two types of value-considerations in their search for (political) legitimacy: plurality/diversity of ways of life and change. This is not to say that these value-considerations are the only ones posing a normative legitimacy challenge. As alluded to above, issues related to equality and inequality raise extremely important normative (and policy/political) questions as well as questions for political legitimacy, within and among nations. But plurality/diversity of ways of life and change are certainly a key area of normative challenge for legitimacy today.

As such, the normative challenge related to values of legitimacy revolves around two sorts of problematics: an epistemological/methodological problematic and a content problematic.

Footnote 6 (continued)

politically September 11 had been possible, what had triggered the possibility for September 11 to take place. Maybe doing so could have helped the United States to conceive and build a stronger legitimacy for itself as a global power and the international system it contributes so much to influence.

The epistemological/methodological problematic is about posing and answering questions concerning which values should serve as criteria for evaluation and judgement of legitimacy in the midst of diversity/plurality and historicity (change), so that it is possible to conceptualize, negotiate and ultimately establish normative hierarchies of values serving credibly as the foundation and horizon of legitimacy. In this regard, some of the key questions that have to be dealt with are the following: which are the core values? How do we identify them? What kind of relations should they have with other values in terms of compatibility, competition and hierarchy? How do they change over time, and how can we handle these changes so that we can decide the extent to which values of reference should stay the same or change?

The content problematic concerns the nature of the values that are meant to serve as criteria for evaluation and judgement. And here, in the handling of diversity/plurality and change that is now one of the pillars of the normative quest for legitimacy at the national and international levels, the deliberations and decisions to be taken on the nature of values serving as benchmarks of legitimacy amounts to finding a balance in two areas: first, finding a balance between universality and plurality/diversity; and, second, finding a balance between stability and change. This brings to the fore two sets of questions at the center of legitimacy as a normative challenge. Concerning universality/diversity–plurality: which universality, which values of universality, are legitimate, and which ones are not? Which plurality/diversity, which values of plurality/diversity, are legitimate, and which ones is not? And how do we draw the line between them?[7] Concerning stability and change: which stability, which values of stability, are legitimate, and which ones are not? Which change, which values of change, are legitimate, and which ones are not? And how do we draw the line?

An illustration of the difficulty of the normative challenge and its legitimacy implications has been, in various ways, since the end of the Cold War, the debate around human rights (universalism and cosmopolitanism) and the rights of states and their citizens (a form of particularism). This is not to say that these two types of rights are necessarily contradictory and undermine one another. After all, the respect of national sovereignty (the ultimate right of states) can also contribute to the respect of human rights. But undeniably their relations are and have been in recent years sources of dilemmas and of much discussion.

At the international level, this has been exemplified in the context of humanitarian interventions and the principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), with the question: what are the rights of people beyond borders versus the rights of states (sovereignty)? It has also taken place in the framework of terrorism, with the question: what rights do terrorists have as human beings and to what extent can these rights be ignored for the sake of national security and the security of citizens (see the issues of torture and targeted killing) (Berman 2004; Greenberg and Dratel 2005; Greenberg 2019; Delmas-Marty 2010)? At the domestic level, dilemmas of normative

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[7] The stress under which (Western) liberal universalism tends to be at the moment, within and among countries, both from the conservative and progressive sides, and the calls for revisiting and reforming it, is an aspect of this story.

legitimacy have been posed by immigration issues, such as: what rights do immigrants have compared to the rights of citizens (Coicaud and Sieger 2019)?[8]

Nolens volens, citizens, political actors, states and regional and international organizations are being forced to face the dilemmas that these normative issues bring about and take a position (which they tend to do reluctantly) on what are the core values of their identity, and legitimacy, and therefore the policies they should endorse.

6 The Technological Challenge

A fifth challenge for legitimacy is of a technological nature. At first sight it may appear strange to put forward the idea that technology could generate a political legitimacy challenge. However, history shows that technology and, more specifically, technological innovation often produce massive transformations in the life of societies and their people, which end up affecting relations of power in society, its values and political organization and with them, ultimately, the conception and practice of political legitimacy. The way in which technological innovation accompanied the development of capitalism, and how, in the West, the development of capitalism, as an economic system, and of democracy, as a political system, took place hand in hand is a case in point. Closer to our time, as alluded to before, the impact that financial markets enhanced by information technology have had in the last decades not only on the economic, but also the political fate of countries shows also that technology, especially new technology, affects deeply matters of legitimacy.

From this perspective, one of the key questions for us to reflect on is whether or not the demands of political legitimacy, such as in terms of visibility, publicity and identification of power relations, so that assigned responsibility and accountability can take place, can cope and adapt to technological innovation, and to what extent? For while it is true that the question of the relations between political innovation (and legal innovation) and technological innovation, and what this means for the evolution of legitimacy, is not new (this is a perennial problem associated with the historicity of social life), these relations are not getting easier. For instance, while politics is historically to a large extent an enterprise of definition and delimitation of rights, duties and responsibilities by territorialization (the nation-state), it has to a greater and greater extent to deal with the central place that technologies which are more deterritorialized and immaterialized than ever have come to occupy (Kulesza 2012).

In this domain, the situations in which new technologies bring about issues of legitimacy are many. In the context of new forms of warfare, for example, think about the use of armed drones, which in its time the Obama Administration seemed to be especially supportive of (Mazzetti 2013). As reports from the United Nations indicate, they represent, in the context of "targeted killings", a significant challenge

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[8] On this issue, refer to David Miller, "Extent and Limits of Global Justice", in Jean-Marc Coicaud and Lynette E. Sieger (eds.), *Conversation on Justice from National, International, and Global Perspectives*.

for international humanitarian law, the law of human rights and their legitimacy (Heyns 2016). With cyber warfare among major powers seeming to increase and become a tool of choice in the context of their strategic competition, it is perhaps the laws of war, and the legitimacy guidelines they rely on, that could be, at least in part, revisited. Another example is the discovery a few years ago of the system of cyber espionage put in place in the United States by the National Security Agency (NSA) of the US, which revealed a surveillance system affecting phone and internet communications globally. This type of practice poses a problem for their legitimacy, and for the possibility of regulating them through law to protect the private data of people.

7 Reassessment of the Globalization Challenge

Earlier we touched upon the question of globalization and its impact on legitimacy issues. This impact has been so profound that when it comes to globalization and legitimacy and the way forward, we are now at a crossroads. In light of the existence of upsides and downsides, of winners and losers in the current wave of globalization, with respect to the way forward we are facing at least three (there are of course more detailed options) possible ways of thinking, and three possible courses of action: should we reject globalization, accept it or change it? The answer to this question is likely to shape the political legitimacy of tomorrow.[9]

Rejecting globalization is the idea that the downsides or dark sides of globalization make it unacceptable, and therefore it has to be rejected. This is what de-globalization is to a large extent about. As such, in the West, although they can overlap, de-globalization is made of two major camps: the progressive camp and the conservative camp. The progressive camp, for instance, consists of actors favoring a more environmentally friendly and sustainable approach to the global economy. The conservative camp consists of a somewhat populist approach, for example favoring economic protectionism.

Another way of thinking and acting is accepting globalization as it is. It amounts to thinking that having winners and losers is inevitable. This is how the world and international competition go. International life, even more so than national life, is Darwinian. One has to fight and adapt, or be left behind.

A third way of thinking is about improving globalization. It amounts to the following: although winners and losers have been a defining feature of globalization, going forward we should make globalization a win–win situation (Coicaud 2018).

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[9] Climate change and its implications, as they are related to an economic way of life, can be seen as part of this debate. Already on the map a decade ago, they can now less and less be altogether ignored and underestimated. The urgency of the situation is illustrated by the increasing changes in extreme weather and climate events (such as heat waves and droughts) and the strong evidence confirming that some of these phenomena are related to human activities. Consequently, environmental issues are more and more becoming a major focus of the work of international organizations and international law in connection with concerns of sustainability and fairness.

Once again, how these issues will be addressed, let alone answered will condition in a very fundamental way the viability and legitimacy of national and international economies and of the (national and international) political arrangements that underwrite them.

8 The Crisis of Democracy Challenge

The crisis democracy is facing today is another major challenge for political legitimacy. From this perspective, the current perception of democracy is quite paradoxical: on the one hand, as a political paradigm, democracy tends to be celebrated; on the other hand, the way it functions, or does not function, is heavily criticized, to the point that the idea of democracy itself is contested. This is likely to have an impact on the question of legitimacy, nationally and internationally (Coicaud 2019).

The celebration of democracy (Held 2009), defined at the most basic level as a type of governmental regime and organization of society where the power of the executive is constrained, and citizens participate in the exercise of power and have their rights guaranteed,[10] is on display both at the national and international levels. At the national level, democracy continues to serve as a benchmark of legitimacy. It is the norm or "gold standard", against which other types of regimes are evaluated and ranked. Democracy is the norm in countries and regions of the world where democracy has emerged and flourished as the modern political and legal culture, essentially in the Western world. But it is also the norm in many other parts of the world where democracy remains an inspiration for people and is a goal to be achieved.[11] This is not to say that the whole world now lives under democratic rule and that all democratic regimes are perfect. But a significant number of countries are to various degrees presently governed by regimes labeled as democratic. At the international level, democracy has also a lot of appeal. In the contemporary era most of the normative and institutional recommendations put forward to make the world better managed and altogether better refer, directly or indirectly, to democratic modes of global governance, and ask for more democratic modes of global governance. In this regard, even the regimes that at home are not democratic call for more democracy at the international level, which entails, among other things, better levels of representation and participation in international institutions and their decision-making processes. An example of this is China. As a result, when it comes to reforming international organizations, the United Nations and its institutions in particular, and the world system of global governance, most stake-holders, whoever they are, tend to ask not for less democracy but for stronger democratic mechanisms. At least from the point of view of the rhetoric put forward by member-states,

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[10] I do not restrict here the meaning of the term "democracy" to a specific form of democracy, like liberal democracy, social-democracy, etc. I refer to the general understanding of democracy, which then can take specific forms and can be evaluated positively or negatively.

[11] Hence the fact that it is puzzling in these parts of the world to see the disenchantment with which democracy is often seen in Western developed countries. I saw this reaction with colleagues in Taiwan.

including regimes rejecting (Western) democratic models at home, more democratic forms of global governance seem to be a basic requirement, a basic condition for a more principled and better managed international system. To the extent that they feel it will serve their interest, actors, including state-actors, do not want less democracy in global governance. They want more. Against this background, for some liberal thinkers, not surprisingly, democratic governance is viewed as the best way to address and resolve competing interests between actors and to ensure cooperation internationally (Held 1995).

Yet, today's reality of democracy is probably criticized as much as democracy as a paradigm is celebrated. In fact, the concrete economic, social and political challenges a number of Western democracies have been facing in the past years, and what seems to be the successes of illiberal regimes, China to begin with, is doing much to undermine the attractiveness and credibility, if not legitimacy, of democratic reality, nationally and internationally, which appears increasingly disconnected from its foundational values.

At the national level, the democratic narrative tells a happy story in many countries, like in established democracies in Nordic countries, Switzerland or Canada, or in those young democracies that are functioning relatively well and remain somewhat optimistic about the way forward. Even Taiwan, in spite of its ambiguous international status, its tense relationship with China and its increasing diplomatic isolation,[12] is viewed as a positive story. At the same time, in the regions of the world that are historically home to democracy (Western Europe and the US), the reality of democracy is the target of harsh criticisms. In Europe, in countries like France, the UK, Spain, and Italy, the discrediting of policies seen as ineffective and contrary to the interests of the average citizen, and of national political establishment that endorses them, is a case in point. In addition, the European Union (EU), meant to bring countries together and at one point viewed as part of a post-national evolution (Habermas 2001), is heavily criticized for its democratic deficit. People have come to think that not only they do not have a say in European policies but national policies themselves are out of reach due to the growing influence of the European Union on the destiny of European countries. In the US, the critiques addressed to the reality of democratic politics are no less severe. For instance, Congress is perceived as serving special interests (Gilens and Page 2014; Ferguson 1995; Judis 2001) more than the principles and demands of the will of the people.

The rise of populism in recent years both in Europe and the US is an illustration of this state of affairs. As such, while populism may further weaken democracy, more than anything else it is the product and the result of the failures of the democratic system. This is the case in Europe: in Southern (Greece, Cyprus) and Central Europe (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia for instance), but also in

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[12] The number of countries recognizing Taiwan as a state has dwindled in recent years as China's diplomatic influence has strengthened. As of June 2018, only 19 countries continued to choose to recognize Taipei over Beijing, most of them small island states or in Central and South America—regions that in the past had limited economic ties with China. The last country to establish diplomatic relations with China and cut ties with Taiwan was the Dominican Republic, in spring 2018.

Western Europe (Germany, France, Spain, Italy, the UK) as well as in Scandinavian countries, most notably Finland and Sweden. And it is also the case in the US, with the election of Donald Trump in November 2016 as president of the US. Arguably, in none of these countries would populism have risen to the extent it has if the political system, and perhaps society, as a whole, had not been in a state of severe crisis.

A source of concern is also the impact that such a weakening of Western democracy could have internationally. This concern is all the more serious considering that at the international level, the reality of democracy is also under a cloud of suspicion. To start with, the international system as it has been established under the influence of the big Western powers has never been as democratic, benign and benevolent as its proponents want us to believe. Recognizing its positives and benefits should not lead us to overlook its negatives. In this regard, the international projection of power of democratic countries, especially the most powerful of them, is often seen as self-centered. To this day, their predatory track record (such as colonialism and imperialism) has not been forgotten and continues to create much resentment. The ability that regimes like those of Russia and particularly now China have to be attractive in the developing world is not only caused by developing countries seeking alternatives to relations with Western developed countries. It also has sources in a lack of real trust in Western powerful nations. The fact that, in the post-Cold War era, much as before, when they have to choose between their national interest and international human rights considerations (human rights as one of the defining features of democratic values), powerful democratic Western nations rarely fail to choose the former over the latter and even use at times human rights considerations to further their interests and impose their views (Acharya 2018),[13] only reinforces mistrust (Coicaud 2007). Moreover, the role of powerful democratic countries in how they promote democracy (ideas and institutions) in the system of global governance is problematic.[14] Be it in the context of international law or of international organizations, which continue to be a Western construct, this promotion tends to be more often than not part of a one-sided and rather hypocritical agenda, more self-interested than truly mindful of democratic demands. At worst, this is the case when international law and international organizations constitute straightforward tools of Western democratic powers interests. At best, it is the case when the progressive/democratic aspects of international law and international organizations do not stop being the captives of their conservative framework, recognizing the rights of the powerless

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[13] In the words of Amitav Acharya, concerning the case of Libya and its implications for Syria: "Western pundits who lament that the world is on "fire"… should pause to ask: who started those fires? Part of the answer should be obvious: the failed and misguided policies of leaders of the Western world on the pretext of maintaining international stability… The invasion of Iraq in 2003 tops the list… There are other examples, especially the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized humanitarian intervention in Libya. Led by the UK and France, that intervention turned a mandate for civilian protection into a campaign for regime change, thereby ensuring that there would be no consensus on authorizing intervention to save lives in Syria.", in *The End of American World Order* (pp. 155–156).

[14] This is not to say that the track record of other big powers (such as Russia and China) is better or will be better. After all, once in a position of power it is always tempting to overlook others.

only on the basis of the terms and to the advantages of the powerful (democratic countries) (Coicaud, b: 42; Coicaud and Charlesworth 2010: 40–41).[15]

9 The Governance Challenge

Ultimately, all these challenges, expressing and bringing about problems of political legitimacy, are all the more likely to open up more difficulties in terms of legitimacy if a last challenge, the governance challenge, is not addressed successfully. This is not to say that a solution to these challenges entirely rests on good governance, both institutional and human. These challenges are at times structural, linked to deep evolutions of modernity, or based on influential actors (economic actors) on which institutional and human leadership and their policies do not always have omnipotence and full leverage. In this regard, one should not overlook the complexities of the task at hand and should recognize that there are limits to what even the best governance can do. Perfection is arguably beyond human reach and more often than not reasonable imperfection is the best that can be done. Moreover, while not perfect (but what is perfect?), the current modalities of governance have their virtues and benefits, at the international level, where all is not out of control, and at the national level, where there are countries that are well managed and successful.

At the same time, one has to recognize that there is also a substantial deficit of good governance at work. In this regard, beyond the question of institutions of governance, a problem in and of itself, the credibility and, indeed, legitimacy of the people in charge is now probably questioned more than ever. This may be the product of greater transparency and information on matters of politics, although this is far from certain. It may also be that citizens increasingly doubt the sense of public ethics and commitment to their mission of those in power, and are therefore asking for more accountability. Regardless, the fact of the matter is that this state of affairs, when significant at the national level, reverberates at the international level. In other words, political leadership internationally cannot be in good shape if it is in part the product of an unhealthy political leadership nationally.

As we can see, the seriousness of these challenges and their associated trends already make issues of political legitimacy especially salient today, and this is likely to be even more the case in the future. Politics at the national and international levels is likely to have to wrestle with them for years to come.

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[15] In this sense, this "at best" approach can be even more damaging than the straightforward instrumental approach because it amounts to a form of amputating and, in the end, alienating recognition. This is illustrated by the recognition in international law of the rights of indigenous people only as subsumed in a nation-state structure. The benefits of self-determination leading to independence are beyond the reach of indigenous people.

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