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# Ordinary Patterns in an Extraordinary Crisis: How International Relations Makes Sense of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract** The customary prescription for handling “problems without passports” is to work through international intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), act collectively for humanity’s future, and build up specialized knowledge. But around the world, patterns from the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic defied the prescription. IGOs were blamed, narrow or short-term interests were prioritized, and divided reactions to experts were on display. International Relations (IR) scholarship helps explain why: (1) research on bureaucracy and institutional design examines the challenge of making IGOs accountable to member-states but also insulated from them; (2) research on delegation and socialization explores commonplace problems involving time-inconsistency and credible commitments; and (3) research on epistemic communities and anti-elitism describes the rationale and fears of permitting public policy to be guided by unelected experts. The initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic reflect how the world can look when it lacks resolute leadership to overcome commonplace aversions to IGOs, to broader or longer-term interests, and to experts. Yet while IR scholarship makes sense of these patterns, it does not say enough about why resolute leadership wanes, or what to do about IGO performance when it does. Answers to such questions are crucial not only for recovering from the COVID-19 crisis, but for dealing with whatever global crises lie ahead.

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“Problems without passports” are challenges that disregard national borders, threatening people in many different nation-states. The phrase was popularized in 2009 by former United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who saw issues such as pollution, weapons proliferation, and organized crime as humanity’s shared enemies. To deal with these issues, Annan urged governments and the public to work through international intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), collaborate on collective long-term solutions, and defer to experts with specialized knowledge.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the response to problems without passports should be multilateral, far-sighted, and apolitical.

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1. Annan 2009.

The novel coronavirus that spread throughout the world in 2020 certainly seemed to fit the definition of problems without passports,<sup>2</sup> yet as the outbreak turned into the full-fledged COVID-19 pandemic, countries defied each of Annan's prescriptions, producing three patterns.

One was a tendency to blame IGOs. More than 100 countries demanded an independent investigation into the World Health Organization (WHO) response to the disease.<sup>3</sup> Even researchers and non-governmental organizations that tried to defend the organization sounded apologetic, noting that the WHO's "monolithic" bureaucracy makes it slow<sup>4</sup> and its competing member-states make it timid.<sup>5</sup> But the United States government went furthest in its blame. Declaring that the organization had bungled repeatedly<sup>6</sup> and "cost many lives,"<sup>7</sup> the US announced it would end its role as the WHO's largest financial contributor.

This relates to a second pattern: a temptation to prioritize narrow or short-term interests, rather than broad or long-term ones. Many public health experts decried the US government's de-funding move as selfish and myopic. For instance, a former WHO official warned it would jeopardize poor countries' "main lifeline,"<sup>8</sup> and the president of the American Medical Association declared it made finding a solution "dramatically more challenging."<sup>9</sup> But the US was hardly unique in indulging narrow or short-term interests. Against the advice of the World Health Organization, approximately eighty countries restricted exports of essential medical supplies<sup>10</sup> and approximately 160 countries banned foreign travelers.<sup>11</sup>

This points to a third pattern: a divided reaction to experts. Variation arose within and across countries as some government leaders and members of the public deferred to public health experts but others contested them.<sup>12</sup> For instance, many national

2. WHO Emergency Committee 2020.

3. "Coronavirus: WHO Members Agree Response Probe," *BBC*, 19 May 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52726017>>.

4. Jason Weaver, "How the 'Bureaucratic' World Health Organization Ended Up on the Hot Seat over its COVID Response," Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 10 July 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/world-health-organization-who-covid-1.5641966>>.

5. Buranyi 2020.

6. Trump 2020.

7. Azar 2020.

8. Michael Merson, "The Dangerous Fallout from Cutting US Funding for the WHO," *Washington Post*, 15 April 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/15/cutting-us-funding-who-is-unjustified-dangerous/>>.

9. David Lynch and Emily Rauhala, "Trump Says US to Withdraw from World Health Organization and Announces New BroadSides against Beijing," *Washington Post*, 29 May 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/29/trump-china-hong-kong-who/>>.

10. Andrew Shalal, "WTO Report Says 80 Countries Limiting Exports of Face Masks, Other Goods," *Reuters*, 23 April 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-trade-wto-idUSKCN2253IX>>.

11. Mara Pillinger, "Virus Travel Bans are Inevitable, but Ineffective," *Foreign Policy*, 23 February 2020, retrieved from <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/23/virus-travel-bans-are-inevitable-but-ineffective/>>.

12. See Casey Leins, "10 States with the Most Aggressive Response to COVID-19," *US News*, 17 March 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2020-03-17/10-states-with-the-most-aggressive-response-to-coronavirus>>; Orion Rummeler, "At Least 48 Local Public Health Leaders

health advisors were like-minded in recommending intense and far-reaching counter-measures such as lockdowns or contact-tracing<sup>13</sup>—but although countries such as New Zealand and South Korea readily heeded the advice, countries such as Brazil and Russia resisted.<sup>14</sup> And in a sign of governments’ diverging views on experts in the WHO, a UN Security Council resolution on COVID-19 stalled for months as China insisted that the resolution endorse the World Health Organization, but the United States demanded that it not be mentioned at all.<sup>15</sup>

These three patterns—a tendency to blame IGOs, a temptation to prioritize narrow or short-term interests, and a divided reaction to experts—mean that intergovernmental organizations are highly vulnerable. Besides being disparaged directly, IGOs embody the wider interests and specialized knowledge that are also being snubbed. At first glance, this situation seems puzzling. Why, while struggling with a pandemic, would states opt to question or punish the very IGO that is supposed to guide the world’s response? Since this disease is a shared threat and cannot be defeated instantaneously, why aren’t states concentrating on what would be helpful for the larger community, well into the future? And why in a crisis of public health are any politicians or members of the public refusing to follow guidance from public health experts?

The three patterns defy what Kofi Annan recommended for handling problems without passports, and international relations (IR) scholarship helps to explain why. Research on *bureaucracy* and *institutional design* examines the challenge of making IGOs accountable to member-states but also insulated from them. Research on *delegation* and *socialization* exposes governments’ hardships overcoming time-inconsistency and non-credible commitments. Research on *epistemic communities* and *anti-elitism* reveals upsides and downsides for permitting public policy to be formulated by technocratic experts. Together, these veins show how the world can look without resolute leadership that overcomes commonplace resistance to IGOs, to broader or longer-term interests, and to experts.<sup>16</sup> Thus, although the pandemic may be extraordinary, its political patterns are quite ordinary.<sup>17</sup>

Yet while existing IR scholarship helps to explain these patterns from the initial months of the COVID-19 crisis, it says less about why resolute leadership wanes. It also offers little guidance about where IGOs—with their embodiment of wider interests

Have Quit or Been Fired During the Pandemic,” *Axios*, 10 August 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.axios.com/coronavirus-health-officials-california-e28c6c3d-6668-4e04-8d28-271bb1fb45fe.html>>.

13. A notable exception was Sweden, where national officials adhered to the recommendation of chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell *not* to impose a nation-wide lockdown (Love Liman and Niclas Rolander, “Swedish COVID Expert Says the World Still Doesn’t Understand,” *Bloomberg News*, 28 June 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-28/sweden-s-covid-expert-says-the-world-still-doesn-t-understand>>).

14. Reid Wilson, “Russia, Brazil Struggle with Coronavirus Response,” *The Hill*, 8 May 2020, retrieved from <<https://thehill.com/policy/international/496714-russia-brazil-struggle-with-coronavirus-response>>.

15. Michelle Nichols, “Months Later, UN Security Council Backs Call for Coronavirus Truce,” *Reuters*, 1 July 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-un/months-later-u-n-security-council-backs-call-for-coronavirus-truce-idUSKBN242722>>.

16. Gilpin 1987, 73, 78–79.

17. For a related view, see Drezner 2020.

and specialized knowledge—go from here. This points to two sets of open questions. The first set is retrospective: in what ways have current conditions resulted from ordinary IR patterns interacting with specific *domestic* developments, such as party polarization in the US or populism in various places around the world? A second set of questions is forward-looking: given the vulnerable position of intergovernmental organizations, how should IGO *performance* be gauged and (if necessary) remedied?

Concrete answers are crucial not only for recovering from the COVID-19 crisis, but also for dealing with whatever other global challenges lie ahead. The next crisis might involve nuclear proliferation, economic inequality, climate change, another pandemic, or something else entirely. But no matter what it is, absent resolute leadership, the three patterns will tend to appear again.

### Pattern 1: The Tendency to Blame International Intergovernmental Organizations

During the initial months of the COVID-19 crisis, one prominent pattern was the tendency to blame the World Health Organization, the UN system's leading IGO for health policy. The US Secretary of Health and Human Services declared that the WHO had failed to "obtain the information that the world needed."<sup>18</sup> US president Donald Trump announced a drastic decision to cut off WHO funding, on the grounds that the organization's Ethiopian Director-General had accepted Chinese defiance of WHO reporting obligations, hesitated to declare a global emergency, and capitulated to Chinese pressure to sideline Taiwanese warnings.<sup>19</sup> The US government was unusual in its harshness, but it was not alone in blaming the WHO.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, more than 100 countries endorsed the European Union's call for an independent investigation into the organization's handling of the disease.<sup>21</sup>

Like other IGOs, the World Health Organization is a body that has been established by agreement among governments or their representatives, and is sufficiently institutionalized to include some sort of centralized administrative apparatus with a permanent staff.<sup>22</sup> In other words, IGOs are composed of member-states and also bureaucracies. Key features of bureaucracies include formal rules, a division of labor, and a hierarchical structure.<sup>23</sup> These features have laudable aims, such as making the staff's responses consistent and impartial, facilitating efficient accumulation and use of expertise, and ensuring a chain of command.<sup>24</sup>

18. Azar 2020.

19. Trump 2020.

20. Javier Hernandez, "Trump Slammed the WHO over Coronavirus. He's Not Alone," *New York Times*, 29 May 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/world/asia/trump-who-coronavirus-china.html>>.

21. European Union 2020.

22. Gutner and Thompson 2010, 231.

23. Weber 2007, chapter VIII.

24. Biermann and Siebenhuner 2009.

Yet formal rules, a division of labor, and a hierarchical structure—even if functioning flawlessly—also make bureaucracies seem impersonal, narrow, and regimented.<sup>25</sup> Bureaucracy carries negative connotations of “faceless bureaucrats” who are mired in “red tape” and are aloof from those they serve.<sup>26</sup> Such perceptions are particularly relevant at the international level: the majority of IGOs are headquartered in just a handful of mostly Western and wealthy countries such as Switzerland, and their performance is hard for most of the world’s population to really scrutinize and understand.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to carrying negative connotations, the bureaucracies within IGOs are easy to scapegoat because they face the near-impossible task of satisfying heterogeneous stakeholders.<sup>28</sup> Staff are expected to serve the interests of their member-states as well as the interests of the wider global public, but the two are not identical. Instead, the interests of national governments regularly conflict with each other and with the greater good.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, no matter what IGO staff do, they are likely to irritate some subset of stakeholders and be accused of performing poorly.<sup>30</sup>

Such irritation with bureaucracy links to a conundrum highlighted in research on institutional design. When an institution is created, one key choice is setting the amount of insulation.<sup>31</sup> Insulation refers to a dampening of the mechanisms by which stakeholders can try to monitor, steer, or reverse organizational activities; in IGOs, for example, insulation may mean that member-states lack common levers of control such as financial domination or veto power.<sup>32</sup> Ideally, insulation would be set “just right”: enough that IGO bureaucracies are protected from the parochialism and vacillations of their member-states, but low enough that they are still accountable to those member-states. Unfortunately, insulation is difficult to calibrate, and even if perfect initially, it can change over time.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, both relatively high insulation and relatively low insulation attract blame.

Consider IGOs with relatively high insulation. If member-states cannot easily monitor, steer, or reverse what bureaucracies do, it is tough for bureaucracies to claim to be accountable. Without accountability, IGO staff can fall into pathologies such as fixating on means instead of ends, promoting one-size-fits-all policy responses, or squandering resources in battles over turf.<sup>34</sup> Relatedly, they could disregard their duty to national governments and instead pursue their own preferences, either by doing less than asked (shirking) or more than asked (zealotry).<sup>35</sup> Since

25. See Beach 2004; Grigorescu 2010.

26. Hattke, Hensel, and Kuluczka 2020.

27. See Mathiason 2007; Johnson 2011; Bearce and Joliff-Scott 2019.

28. See Cox and Jacobson 1974; Chorev 2012.

29. Bauer 2006.

30. Graham 2013.

31. Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001.

32. Johnson 2014, 4.

33. See Duffield 2003; Barnett and Coleman 2005; Stone 2011.

34. Barnett and Finnemore 1999.

35. Cortell and Peterson 2006.

relatively high insulation makes it difficult for member-states to claw back control, disgruntled governments are likely to look for ways to substitute for that IGO.

But IGOs with relatively low insulation also attract blame, though for different reasons. If member-states readily interfere with bureaucratic activities, bureaucracies cannot carve out the space needed to achieve their laudable performance aims. Instead, they can be prevented from pursuing the public good.<sup>36</sup> They also can be compelled to privilege a handful of member-states over others.<sup>37</sup> The situation becomes especially hazardous if IGO staff are caught between powerful member-states who have taken different stances on an issue: relatively low insulation makes it easy for these competing member-states to exploit existing control mechanisms in their tug-of-war to pressure or punish the IGO.

Therefore intergovernmental organizations make easy targets, since they are bureaucratic entities that seem distant from those they serve, and they can almost always be denounced for too little or too much insulation from their most powerful member-states. This helps to explain the WHO's struggles in the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Health Organization found itself caught between two powerful and competing member-states—it was able to raise the alarm, but it could not single-handedly answer the call.<sup>38</sup> When the United States government suspected that the WHO bureaucracy was being manipulated by China, President Trump took advantage of an important control mechanism by moving to cut the organization's single largest source of funding.<sup>39</sup> Such a drastic move underscores what research on bureaucracy and institutional design teaches: it is very important but incredibly difficult to ensure that IGO bureaucracies are accountable to member-states and also insulated from them.<sup>40</sup>

## Pattern 2: The Temptation to Prioritize Narrow or Short-Term Interests

IGO-blaming is tied to a second pattern: states' temptation to put narrow or short-term interests ahead of broader or longer-term ones. In past crises, the United States often endured special costs to lead and sustain multilateralism.<sup>41</sup> Yet this time, with its swift move to defund the WHO in the middle of the pandemic, the US not only

36. Lall 2017.

37. Johnson 2011.

38. Youde 2015, 129.

39. Busby *forthcoming*.

40. Insulation is not static, and the WHO's previous successes explain some of its current struggles. For instance, during the 2003 outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), the organization was effective and forceful vis-à-vis member-states. But shortly afterward, when the WHO bureaucracy drafted a new version of the International Health Regulations (IHR) to formalize and insulate the tools it had used for SARS, member-states such as Brazil, Canada, China, India, and Russia prevented the document from giving the WHO real power against non-compliant governments (Buranyi 2020).

41. See Fazal 2020.

refused to lead but also resisted burden-sharing. By unilaterally punishing the organization for what it perceived to be poor performance, the US jeopardized the WHO's ability to act in the future and for the broader community. Moreover, as a high-level WHO employee lamented, the American government's signal that "multilateralism isn't the answer" could ripple "across other countries and other areas of multilateralism."<sup>42</sup> And indeed, selfish or myopic interests won out around the world as various governments implemented export restrictions, travel bans, and unilateral vaccine development—all despite the World Health Organization's objections.<sup>43</sup>

Such concern about states prioritizing short-term or narrow interests is a central topic in international relations research. A particular action may be rational from the perspective of the present, or of an individual state, yet tragically irrational from the perspective of the future, or of a collective of states.<sup>44</sup> This is famously illustrated in a simple one-shot Prisoners' Dilemma game, where the risk of a "sucker's payoff" means that each state has an immediate incentive to reject cooperation with others, even though cooperation could make all states better off.<sup>45</sup> The risk can be attenuated by changing the one-shot game into a repeated interaction with no definite end. But, since governments still may struggle to commit to collective goals and endure immediate pain in order to achieve future gains,<sup>46</sup> IR scholars have examined further solutions for overcoming the allure of the self and the present.

One solution is delegation, in which a "principal" (a set of nation-states) makes a revocable grant of authority to an "agent" (IGO staff), empowering the agent to act on the principal's behalf.<sup>47</sup> When delegation works well, it ties states' hands, helping them stay the course toward accomplishments that require sustained efforts now to produce big benefits later. It gets states to contribute to collective goods that otherwise would be under-provided due to free-riding. Since interactions are repeated, agents can hone their abilities to perform delegated tasks, and principals can adopt a more sanguine win some/lose some mentality toward one another. Thus, by entrusting tasks to IGO-agents, state-principals can achieve greater things than their narrow or short-term interests would normally permit.<sup>48</sup>

An alternative way to overcome the allure of the self and the present is through socialization, a process by which social interactions induct newcomers into particular

42. Author conversation with high-level employee "A" in the World Health Organization Secretariat, 8 July 2020.

43. Author conversation with high-level employee "B" in the World Health Organization Secretariat, 8 July 2020.

44. See Lake and McCubbins 2006; Gutner 2010; Dreher and Vreeland 2014. For further examples, see Stasavage 2020 on disaster preparedness or Kenwick and Simmons 2020 on border closures.

45. Axelrod 1984.

46. Miller 2000.

47. See Hawkins et al. 2006, 7; Pollack 2002; Vaubel 2006; Bradley and Kelley 2008. Note: situations also can be complicated by trustees, multiple principals, or multiple agents (Nielson and Tierney 2003; Alter 2008; Elsig 2011).

48. See Abbott and Snidal 1998; Lake and McCubbins 2006. However, even such IGO successes can result in grumbling from states, who are being pushed (as they themselves sought) to overcome the interests of the "present self."



modes of thinking, feeling, and acting.<sup>49</sup> Through recurring interactions, a state develops or changes how it understands its role, responsibilities, and interests.<sup>50</sup> As certain types of behavior are removed from its choice set and other types of behavior become automatic, the state becomes more predictable, trustworthy, and collaborative within its group.<sup>51</sup> This shifts the state away from thinking only about narrow or short-term interests, and it also makes the state's promises more credible. In international relations scholarship, two of the most important arenas for socialization are individual IGOs<sup>52</sup> and the broader post-World War II "liberal world order."<sup>53</sup> For the latter, the United States drew on its hegemonic position and its identity as a liberal democracy to construct a system of norms, institutions, and laws by which the US bound itself to other states in the hopes of prolonging its own leadership.

Although delegation and socialization can help governments commit to collective goals and endure immediate pain in order to achieve future gain, neither is failsafe. The success of delegation often hinges on IGO-agents having sufficient insulation from their state-principals; without such buffers, states will simply impede or reverse what their agents do. Meanwhile, the success of socialization often hinges on widespread and continuous grooming of a group identity; without such grooming, states will simply revert to their narrow or short-term interests. If delegation or socialization unravel, the underlying Prisoners' Dilemma (which once had been transformed into a repeated game) eventually degenerates to its one-shot essence. Even if the game has not officially concluded, players begin to sense its eventual end. In a self-fulfilling prophesy, counting on broad or long-term benefits becomes questionable, which makes cooperation chancier and reinstates the pull of narrow or short-term interests.<sup>54</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, socialization quickly proved inadequate. In the past several years, a series of challenges—including populist unrest, financial crises, refugee flows, Brexit, the securitization of public health, and a newly assertive China—have rocked regional integration and the Western-led liberal world order, chipping away at group identities and norms.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, the United States has exhibited "hegemonic fatigue."<sup>56</sup> Consequently, while public health experts certainly displayed some cross-country networks and similar ways of thinking about the crisis, socialization was not as deep among heads of government. Rather than considering themselves partners on an interconnected planet, several key government leaders

49. Johnston 2001, 494.

50. See Finnemore 1996; Sikkink 2020. Socialization also occurs within states (e.g., Mayer 2014).

51. See Greenhill 2010; Davis and Meunier 2011.

52. See Checkel 2005; Gheciu 2005; Bearce and Bondanella 2007; Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks 2019.

53. See Ruggie 1982; Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990; Ikenberry 1998; Pevehouse 2005; Doyle 2012.

54. Milner 1997.

55. See Kamradt-Scott and McInnes 2012; Fidler 2019; Patrick 2020.

56. See Gilpin 1987; Damien Cave and Isabella Kwai, "China is Defensive. The US is Absent. Can the Rest of the World Fill the Void?," *New York Times*, 11 May 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/11/world/australia/coronavirus-china-inquiry.html>>; James Fallows, "The 3 Weeks that Changed Everything: Imagine If the National Transportation Safety Board Investigated America's Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic," *The Atlantic*, 29 June 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/06/how-white-house-coronavirus-response-went-wrong/613591/>>.



focused only on the immediate needs of their own countries. This may be unfortunate, but it is not new: nationalist and protectionist leanings predate the COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>57</sup>

Delegation also fell apart. If the World Health Organization could coordinate the response to the virus, all countries would benefit from this collective good. However, the WHO has never been given full authority to dictate the activities of all other actors in global health governance.<sup>58</sup> In fact, as WHO staff attempted to guide the world's response, state-principals themselves were among the most severe impediments, and little stopped them from rescinding or undermining the authority they already had delegated.<sup>59</sup> Skittish about broadcasting vulnerabilities, some national governments were slow to report crucial information to the World Health Organization. Curious whether they could capitalize from keeping their economies running while others shut theirs down, some countries were reluctant to enter lockdowns advocated by public health experts. With chagrin, the WHO Director-General noted that numerous governments had been unresponsive, even though the World Health Organization had "rung the alarm bell loud and clear."<sup>60</sup>

Behind it all, there was friction between health policy's hoped-for and wider long-term gains versus economic policy's guaranteed and concentrated short-term pains. As noted by the virologist guiding Germany's COVID-19 response:

People see that the hospitals are not overwhelmed, and they don't understand why their shops have to shut. They only look at what's happening here, not the situation in, say, New York or Spain. This is the prevention paradox, and for many Germans I'm the evil guy who is crippling the economy.<sup>61</sup>

With the "prevention paradox," not only policy failures but also successes prompt people to question whether broad, long-term benefits were truly worth their costs. The paradox operates at the domestic level and also internationally: when the WHO acts cautiously it is criticized for failing to stop preventable deaths, but when it acts aggressively it is accused of overreacting.<sup>62</sup>

### **Pattern 3: The Divided Reaction to Experts**

The prevention paradox relates to a third pattern from the initial months of the COVID-19 crisis: a divided reaction to experts. Schisms existed at the subnational, national, and international levels as some people readily deferred to public health

57. See Drezner 2020, 14.

58. Youde 2015, 121, 130.

59. Buranyi 2020.

60. Tedros 2020.

61. Laura Spinney, "Germany's COVID-19 Expert: 'For many, I'm the Evil Guy Crippling the Economy,'" *The Guardian*, 26 April 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/26/virologist-christian-drosten-germany-coronavirus-expert-interview>>.

62. Buranyi 2020.

officials but other people challenged them, questioning the efficacy and even the legality of their policy recommendations.<sup>63</sup> Skepticism toward experts certainly hit the World Health Organization; ironically, some of it was fueled by people in the public health profession itself. In July 2020, for instance, 239 scientists from thirty-two countries published an open letter contradicting WHO assertions about airborne virus transmission.<sup>64</sup> Highly visible to laypeople, quarrels like this made the underlying science seem open to interpretation,<sup>65</sup> and some observers questioned whether the WHO was politically neutral enough to interpret the science appropriately.<sup>66</sup>

International relations scholarship helps to explain the divided reaction to experts, who appear most explicitly in work on “epistemic communities.”<sup>67</sup> Epistemic communities are networks of professionals who have an authoritative claim over expertise and policy-relevant knowledge within a particular domain. These professionals do not always come from a single discipline, but they nevertheless share some values, causal beliefs, applied competencies, and ways of validating knowledge.<sup>68</sup> One element of epistemic communities are experts within intergovernmental organizations, which are examined in earlier IR scholarship concerning functionalism and neofunctionalism. Functionalism advocated the creation of numerous IGOs, arranged along functional lines.<sup>69</sup> Neofunctionalism predicted that as states and their citizens became more accustomed to entrusting tasks to unelected IGO experts, cooperation would spill into additional geographic areas and more challenging policy issues.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, from the 1940s onward, functionalist and neofunctionalist principles appeared to triumph as integration widened and deepened in Europe and the UN system encompassed the World Health Organization and other specialized agencies.

Real-world developments and IR scholarship reflected optimism that by moving authority from power-hungry nation-states to professionalized supranational

63. See Elizabeth Braw, “What Sweden Can Teach Us about Coronavirus,” *Politico*, 3 July 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/07/03/what-sweden-can-teach-us-about-coronavirus-348462>>; Simon Jenkins, “Was I Wrong about Coronavirus? Even the World’s Best Scientists Can’t Tell Me,” *The Guardian*, 2 April 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/02/wrong-coronavirus-world-scientists-optimism-experts>>; Cameron Knight and Jackie Borchardt, “‘Unreasonable and Oppressive’: Judge Slams Dr. Amy Acton in order to Reopen Gyms,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 20 May 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2020/05/20/unreasonable-and-oppressive-judge-slams-acton-order-open-gyms/5229032002/>>.

64. Mandavilli 2020.

65. Allison Snyder and Eileen Drage O’Reilly, “Where the Science Stands on Using Face Masks against Coronavirus,” *Axios*, 26 June 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.axios.com/coronavirus-face-mask-science-e9df446b-e7fb-447b-a980-67a9cf73556a.html>>.

66. Emily Rauhala, “Chinese Officials Note Serious Problems in Coronavirus Response: The World Health Organization Keeps Praising Them,” *Washington Post*, 8 February 2020, retrieved from <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/chinese-officials-note-serious-problems-in-coronavirus-response-the-world-health-organization-keeps-praising-them/2020/02/08/b663dd7c-4834-11ea-91abce439aa5c7c1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinese-officials-note-serious-problems-in-coronavirus-response-the-world-health-organization-keeps-praising-them/2020/02/08/b663dd7c-4834-11ea-91abce439aa5c7c1_story.html)>.

67. Research on epistemic communities initially focused on environmental policy but later branched into other areas, including health policy (Cross 2013).

68. Haas 1992, 3.

69. Mitrany 1944.

70. Haas 1964.

experts in IGOs and elsewhere, policymaking could be more stable, efficient, and neutral.<sup>71</sup> In short, it could be less political. Initially, much work on epistemic communities and their functionality emphasized such upsides.

Over time, however, IR scholarship also explored downsides: perhaps policymaking could never be fully apolitical, or even if it could, that might entail a problematic “democratic deficit.”<sup>72</sup> Surely individual experts (and sometimes entire professions) have political leanings, so how could their advice ever be completely free of politics?<sup>73</sup> If experts in a given area confidently express a consensus view, could that be due to partisanship or groupthink, rather than the discovery of an objective truth?<sup>74</sup> If a more diverse group of experts is consulted, how can citizens and elected officials handle the resulting contradictions or uncertainty?<sup>75</sup> And even if unelected specialists are always unbiased and correct, why should IGO staff or wider epistemic communities be able to make recommendations and choices that affect so many people when those people had little say in placing them in their positions?<sup>76</sup>

Suspicious about epistemic communities, functional specialization, and technocratic policymaking reflect larger anti-elite or populist sentiments. Such sentiments simmer within countries, and sometimes (as in the 1930s, 1970s, or recent years) they boil in multiple countries at once. There is more research to be done to understand current anti-elitism, but scholarship already reveals various forms it takes, such as championing folk wisdom rather than formal training, protectionism rather than economic liberalization, outlying areas rather than cosmopolitan cores, unilateralism rather than multilateralism, or nationalism rather than globalism.<sup>77</sup> In addition, anti-elitism sometimes occurs alongside political polarization, which further affects how receptive particular government officials or segments of the public will be to information from experts.<sup>78</sup>

During the initial months of the COVID-19 crisis, all of this made things very tough for experts subnationally, nationally, and internationally. As a high-level employee in the WHO Secretariat points out, people expect the role of public health experts to be threefold:

1. Use some form of rigorous analysis to synthesize the evidence.
2. Test hypotheses and be poised to modify recommendations accordingly.
3. Advise on the implications—direct and indirect, immediate and eventual—of various policy options.<sup>79</sup>

71. E.g., Keohane 1984; Jacobson, Reisinger, and Mathers 1986; Adler 1992.

72. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2006.

73. Chilton and Posner 2015.

74. See Tetlock and Mitchell 2015; Nichols 2017.

75. Backus and Little *forthcoming*.

76. See Majone 1998; Nye 2001.

77. See Nyhan and Reifler 2015; Colgan and Keohane 2017; Bearce and Joliff-Scott 2019; Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Voeten 2020.

78. Lee et al. *forthcoming*.

79. Author conversation with high-level employee “B” in the World Health Organization Secretariat, 8 July 2020.

The first two are thorny. Rigor and synthesis are difficult when a crisis makes the evidence especially rushed, uneven, and incongruent.<sup>80</sup> Meanwhile, modifying hypotheses and recommendations is solid scientific practice—but when done repeatedly it sows confusion and disrupts policies,<sup>81</sup> and when done cautiously it risks missing windows of opportunity.<sup>82</sup>

However, it is the third expectation that is most daunting. By definition, public health experts know about public health, but they do not necessarily know about economics, education, or other societal elements that are also part of the crisis. If public health experts operate alone, policymaking will be incomplete.<sup>83</sup> Yet if experts beyond public health are consulted, the result may be a cacophony of opinions or a toppling of public health as the chief concern.<sup>84</sup> Further complicating things, most of these experts in public health or other fields are not elected. Since they were not voted into office and cannot be voted out, some elected officials see them as inferior, and some members of the public fear their unaccountability.<sup>85</sup> For non-specialists it is easy to suspect, and difficult to disprove, that experts are both out of touch and out of reach.

As research on epistemic communities and anti-elitism shows, accepting the benefits of a profession's work also requires accepting a certain amount of risk.<sup>86</sup> During some crises of the past century, many people have been willing to do that—particularly if they trusted their political leaders, who vouched that the experts, too, could be trusted. But in the initial months of the COVID-19 crisis, that did not happen uniformly.<sup>87</sup> The pandemic hit during a time when citizens and governments in key places around the world were exhibiting polarization, populism, and a backlash against globalists.<sup>88</sup> A lack of elite consensus made divided reactions to experts more likely,<sup>89</sup> and although there are upsides to permitting unelected experts to steer policy, conspicuous segments of the population focused on the (ever-present) downsides instead.<sup>90</sup>

80. Lindzi Wessel, "It's a Nightmare: How Brazilian Scientists Became Ensnared in Chloroquine Politics," *Science*, 22 June 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/06/it-s-nightmare-how-brazilian-scientists-became-ensnared-chloroquine-politics>>.

81. Driedger, Maier, and Jardine 2018.

82. Mandavilli 2020.

83. Nichols 2017, 201–202.

84. Simon Denyer, "Japan Faces Uptick in Coronavirus Cases but No Political Will for New Shutdowns," *Washington Post*, 8 July 2020, retrieved from <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/japan-covid-coronavirus-cases-rise-reopen/2020/07/07/8a76fd66-bc74-11ea-97c1-6cf116ffe26c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/japan-covid-coronavirus-cases-rise-reopen/2020/07/07/8a76fd66-bc74-11ea-97c1-6cf116ffe26c_story.html)>.

85. Nichols 2017, 174.

86. See Nichols 2017, 177; Chilton and Posner 2015; Backus and Little forthcoming.

87. Laypeople's (mis)perceptions about health topics may be particularly difficult to change (e.g., Blair, Morse, and Tsai 2017; Carey et al. 2020; Arriola and Grossman forthcoming).

88. See Helfer 2020; Naoi 2020. Also see Pevehouse forthcoming.

89. See Sunstein 2006, 79, 85, 95; Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015; Guisinger and Saunders 2017.

90. David Nather, "Trump's War on the Public Health Experts," *Axios*, 16 July 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.axios.com/trump-public-health-experts-cdc-fauci-e1509d14-0cf1-4b1c-b107-7753bf95395d.html>>.

## An Agenda for Research

These patterns—the tendency to blame IGOs, the temptation to prioritize narrow or short-term interests, and the divided reaction to experts—look very different from the way Kofi Annan urged the world to handle problems without passports. Yet if the former UN Secretary-General were alive today, he would probably look at the COVID-19 pandemic with dismay, but not surprise. After all, Annan’s recommendations are about how people *should* respond, and he was well aware of obstacles to multilateral, far-sighted, apolitical responses. He readily acknowledged that IGOs were precarious, that people’s sense of a shared global fate was embryonic, and that isms such as nationalism or populism still held appeal.<sup>91</sup>

Indeed, IR scholarship helps to make sense of the three patterns. Research on bureaucracy and institutional design examines the challenge of making IGOs accountable to member-states but also insulated from them; research on delegation and socialization exposes governments’ hardships overcoming time-inconsistency and non-credible commitments; and research on epistemic communities and anti-elitism reveals both upsides and downsides for permitting public policy to be formulated by unelected experts. This is how the world can look without a resolute leader to surmount natural aversions to IGOs and the wider interests or specialized knowledge that they embody.<sup>92</sup>

Therefore, even though the pandemic seems extraordinary, its initial political patterns are quite ordinary. That does not mean, however, that no questions remain. In fact, two important sets of questions need to be explored further.

The first set is retrospective: *In what ways have current conditions resulted from ordinary IR patterns interacting with specific developments in domestic politics?* Blaming IGOs, prioritizing narrow or short-term interests, and reacting in a divided way to experts are recurrent temptations—and yet, at some times in the past, those temptations have been overcome. So what exactly is different about those times, compared to today?

One place to look is within the United States, which has played a pivotal historical role in maintaining order, stability, and institutions at the international level. In recent years, party polarization has reflected and fueled internal divisions in the US, where influential segments of the government and population now exhibit fatigue with global leadership and a craving to “put America first.” The IR literature reveals natural aversions to IGOs, wider interests, and experts—and further attention to developments in US domestic politics could help to explain why resolute leaders step up and surmount these aversions at some points, but not others.

Another place to look is the overall population of states: particular sentiments may be gaining traction in multiple places at the same time. For instance, populism and anti-elitism can take various forms, such as championing folk wisdom, economic

91. Annan 2009.

92. Zürn 2018, 20–21.

protectionism, outlying areas, unilateralism, or nationalism. But when such sentiments take hold in numerous countries concurrently, they pose a serious challenge to formal expertise, economic liberalization, cosmopolitan cores, multilateralism, and globalism. The IR literature reveals that deferring to experts, entrusting tasks to IGOs, and pursuing broader or longer-term interests involve pains as well as gains. Further attention to trends in domestic politics in countries throughout the world could help to explain conditions under which people tend to fixate on the pains, rather than the gains.

Besides these retrospective questions involving domestic politics, a second set of questions is forward-looking and centers on IGOs. *How should the performance of intergovernmental organizations be gauged and addressed?* As scholarship shows, IGOs are vulnerable due to all three patterns explored above: in addition to being disparaged directly, they embody the wider interests and specialized knowledge that are also being snubbed. Yet while existing research makes sense of the struggles of the World Health Organization and other IGOs, it offers far less guidance on what to do about them.<sup>93</sup> How can IGO performance be sensibly evaluated? And if poor performance is uncovered, which remedies are best?

A core difficulty is that IGOs are expected to be responsive to their member-states and also strive for the greater good.<sup>94</sup> As one former WHO Director-General emphasized, “It’s not a question of what one or several governments ask you to do; we are working for humanity.”<sup>95</sup> Since member-states are prone to scapegoat IGOs and are conflicted on the broader or longer-term interests that IGOs embody, it is untenable for IGO performance assessments to be derived from states alone. Researchers must begin by incorporating assessments from a variety of state and non-state actors.<sup>96</sup> Then they can turn to two policy-relevant questions.

First, when should evaluations of intergovernmental organizations take place? A testable hypothesis is that IGO evaluations are most useful if they occur at regular intervals. Pandemics and other emergencies heighten demands for performance reviews on a post hoc basis, but conducting reviews at regular intervals would

93. In part because amassing a literature on IGO performance has been sluggish. The state-centrism of traditional IR theories waylaid scholars into spending years defending that IGOs matter at all (e.g., Finnemore 1996; Martin and Simmons 1998; Hurd 2007; Johnson 2014). Today, instead of a cohesive literature on IGO performance, threads reside in disparate bodies of work, such as regime effectiveness (Krasner 1982; Helm and Sprinz 2000; Mitchell 2004; Young 2011), IGOs’ self-assessments (Weaver 2008; Gutner 2010; Buntaine 2016; Honig 2019), or delegation and institutional design (Hafner-Burton and Schneider 2019).

94. Additional difficulties and ways to overcome them include: 1) benchmark against more than goals, because IGO goals are often too numerous, contradictory, abstract, imposed, aspirational, politicized, and/or fluid to be used literally (Lipson 2010); 2) consider not only outcomes but also the soundness of IGO processes (Tallberg et al. 2016; Lall 2017); and 3) acknowledge the influence of the wider regime complex, because IGOs commonly operate alongside governments, corporations, non-governmental organizations, and other types of actors (Kahler 2009; Abbott and Snidal 2010; Buthe and Mattli 2011; Carpenter 2011; Karns, Mingst, and Stiles 2015; Slaughter 2017; Farrell and Newman 2019; Schmitz, Mitchell, and Vijfeijken. 2020).

95. Gro Harlem Brundtland, quoted in Buranyi 2020.

96. See Gutner and Thompson 2010, 233; Johnson 2016.

make it more likely that some reviews would occur during periods of relative calm. That would afford less tense circumstances for isolating factors and actors to be thanked or blamed. Moreover, post hoc reviews might give an anomalous snapshot, whereas evaluations at regular intervals could reveal more about day-to-day operations and even uncover issues before they become emergencies.

Second, if an IGO is found to be faltering, what is to be done? Here there are many knowledge gaps, because the tools and conditions for improving IGOs are still under-examined. Governments' proclivity is to punish or marginalize IGOs that displease them,<sup>97</sup> but it is unclear whether that actually does much good. After all, if an organization proves to be a poor performer, the knee-jerk reaction is to abandon or starve it, but a counter-intuitive (and potentially superior) response would be to feed it. Future research would be incredibly helpful if it investigated not only reform outcomes, but also a wider variety of reform options.

Such practical questions are crucial for the embattled World Health Organization in the COVID-19 crisis. However, the need for answers also goes beyond the WHO to whatever global challenges lie ahead. The next crisis could involve climate change, economic inequality, nuclear proliferation, another pandemic, or something else entirely.<sup>98</sup> It could be an undreamed-of "black swan," or an obvious and looming "gray rhino."<sup>99</sup> But whatever the form, without a resolute leader the next crisis is likely to produce similar patterns: negative reactions to IGOs as well as the wider interests and expertise that IGOs represent. The world has exhibited these patterns at various points in the past and will exhibit them again in the future.<sup>100</sup> IR scholarship does an adequate job of explaining why the patterns recur. With more work, it could also say more about how to assess and address IGO performance in response.

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97. von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019.

98. See Lipsy 2020.

99. Michelle Wucker, "No, the Coronavirus Wasn't an 'Unforeseen Problem,'" *Washington Post*, 17 March 2020, retrieved from <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/03/17/no-coronavirus-pandemic-wasnt-an-unforseen-problem/>>.

100. Bosco 2017.



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## Key words

Problems without passports; COVID-19; pandemic; World Health Organization; cooperation; multilateralism; international relations; international organization; bureaucracy; institutional design; delegation; socialization; experts; epistemic communities; anti-elitism; leadership; performance