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Transnational Access to International Institutions: Three Approaches

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When, why, and how do transnational actors (TNAs) gain access to international institutions? While a prominent trend in global governance in recent years is an increasing tendency for states and international institutions to involve TNAs as policy experts, service providers, and compliance watchdogs, the understanding of the factors that shape such participation is still weak. The purpose of this chapter is to lay the ground for systematic research on transnational access, by proposing three analytical approaches, informed by rational choice institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, and power-oriented institutionalism. For each approach, I explain the general theoretical logic and identify testable hypotheses, paying specific attention to expected patterns of variation across time, institutions, policy phases, and actors.

The first approach privileges concerns about functional efficiency. It highlights the benefits to states and international institutions of engaging TNAs in order to fulfill functions they are unable or less well positioned to conduct themselves. This approach expects transnational access to vary systematically with functional demands for technical expertise, policy implementation, and monitoring in international cooperation. The second approach privileges concerns about democratic legitimacy. It suggests that we have witnessed the emergence and spread of a new norm of legitimate governance at the global level, requiring international institutions to involve representatives of global civil society to be regarded as democratically legitimate. This approach expects practices of transnational access to become increasingly homogeneous, as this norm is diffused and consolidated. The third approach privileges concerns about power implications. It suggests that states exploit TNAs as
instruments for gaining additional leverage within international institutions, supporting access for like-minded actors and opposing access for adversarial actors. This approach expects the pattern of transnational access to reflect the preferences of the most powerful states.

I conclude the chapter by addressing the question of whether these approaches are best considered competing or complementary, once we move from theoretical specification to empirical research. I argue in favor of an agenda of theoretical dialogue, and outline three alternative models for such dialogue: competitive testing of hypotheses, additive explanatory power, and complementary domains of application.

**The functional efficiency of transnational access**

The first analytical approach to transnational access emphasizes the expected functional benefits to states and international institutions of engaging TNAs. This approach is informed by rational choice institutionalism, which perceives institutional design in functionalist terms, explaining the creation and form of a particular institution with the benefits it is expected to produce. In this view, the decision to offer TNAs access to international policy-making is a deliberate design choice, motivated by the expectation of distinct functional gains. TNAs are seen as capable of fulfilling a set of tasks in international cooperation that states and institutions are unable or less well positioned to conduct themselves. Notably, TNAs may contribute technical expertise, policy implementation, and monitoring of commitments, thus helping states to address information asymmetries, efficiency problems, and credible-commitment dilemmas. This approach predicts that transnational access will vary systematically with the pattern of demand for these functions in global governance.

**Theoretical logic**

The analytical bedrock of this approach is the proposition that institutions are created and designed to address shortcomings in the market or the political system as a means of producing collectively desirable outcomes (Weingast and Marshall, 1988; Williamson, 1975). In the study of international cooperation, this explanation has been deployed to account for the demand for international institutions (Keohane, 1984; Martin, 1992), the delegation of power to international institutions (Hawkins et al., 2006; Tallberg, 2002), and the design of international institutions (Abbott and Snidal, 2000; Koremenos et al., 2001). Typically, the establishment, form, and survival of international institutions have