

Perceptions of a Global Democratic Deficit: An International Survey Experiment

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While scholars consider the global democratic deficit a key issue, we know little about citizens' perceptions in this regard. To what extent and why do citizens perceive global democratic deficiencies? I conceptualize deficiencies absolutely and relatively—theorizing countries, knowledge, and framing as explanatory factors. Between 2018 and 2021, I conducted survey experiments on around 42,000 respondents in 17 highly diverse countries. Contrary to many scholarly assessments, I find that most people do not perceive major global democratic deficiencies, in the sense that global governance is generally not perceived as highly undemocratic in absolute terms and more democratic than developing democracies. However, the results vary by the object and aspect of inquiry: World politics (versus international organizations) and input (versus output) are perceived as less democratic. Plus, neither gains in relevant knowledge nor common framings affect public perceptions, which are thus quite robust. These findings add novel evidence to debates about global governance.

The twenty-first century has already seen multiple transnational crises: climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Ukraine war—to name only a few. Observers have thus intensified their calls for democratic reforms of global governance (Dryzek et al. 2020). Many such proposals assume a democratic deficit in world politics, specifically that citizens cannot partake sufficiently in global policymaking that is not in the public interest (Archibugi and Held 1995). Leading academics have long considered the alleged global democratic deficit a fundamental issue of our time (Nye 2001, 2), while also insisting that the question is “as much social scientific as philosophical” (Moravcsik 2004, 336–37). Since then, empirical and normative scholars have contributed much to our understanding of how international organizations (IOs) fall short of democratic standards and how they (could) address such shortcomings (Cabrera 2014; Grigorescu 2015; Scholte 2011; Tallberg et al. 2013).

Broadly speaking, there are two streams in the existing literature for studying democratic deficits, paralleling the distinction between normative and empirical legitimacy of

global governance (Buchanan and Keohane 2006, 405). In the first stream, analysts evaluate whether a political regime—for example, a national government or global governance—is democratic or not, basing their assessment on criteria that are deemed characteristically democratic (Dingwerth, Blauburger, and Schneider 2011; Hilbrich 2022; Moravcsik 2004). The second stream studies the assessments of the subjects of governance (for example, national citizens). Scholars have used this method to analyze perceptions of democratic deficits at the national and regional levels, often concerning the European Union (EU) (Hobolt 2012; Karp, Banducci, and Bowler 2003; Norris 1999b, 2011; Rohrschneider 2002). While there are many studies on the perceived *legitimacy* of IOs other than the EU, for example, on people's trust or confidence in the UN (Dellmuth et al. 2022a; Ecker-Ehrhardt 2014; Lenz and Viola 2017), so far there are only limited assessments of the existence and extent of a global democratic deficit based on the approach of evaluating public perceptions (Lee and Lim 2022).

Why is it important to address this research gap? First, shedding light on the existence and extent of perceptions of global democratic deficiencies helps ground and advance normative debates on global governance. In particular, cosmopolitan theorists frequently take the democratic deficiency of the international system as a starting point of their arguments for global democracy (Archibugi and Held 1995).

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Different scholars consistently find substantial international public support for democratizing IOs and extending their competences (Fabre, Douenne, and Mattauch 2023; Ghassim 2020; Ghassim, Koenig-Archibugi, and Cabrera 2022; Ghassim and Pauli *forthcoming*; Hahm, Hilpert, and König 2020). Yet, to what extent such public preferences are grounded in an underlying dissatisfaction with the democratic virtues of present-day global governance remains to be explored.

Second, normatively speaking, one may argue that—especially with respect to the *democratic* quality of a regime—the evaluation of the subjects of governance may be considered important as well (Doorenspleet 2015; Hobolt 2012, 91). Some scholars have even posited that “democracy requires” people to be “convinced that they are truly governing themselves” (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2007, 13). This is not to suggest that citizens’ perceptions constitute an objective benchmark of regimes’ democratic qualities. Indeed, citizens of autocratically governed states regularly deem their countries democratic, while citizens of democracies are often (too) critical of their countries’ democratic credentials (Kirsch and Welzel 2019). Yet I hold that public acceptance or rejection of governance institutions is normatively especially pertinent for supposedly democratic regimes. A governance regime aspiring to democratic virtues may face trouble when most subjects do not consider it democratic.

Lastly, in terms of real-world political implications, given the scarcity of direct links between citizens and IOs, why should we expect public attitudes to be relevant to global governance? In the context of recurring debates about “globalism” (Steger 2012), there are many examples for the significant political impact of public opinion concerning IOs. Brexit built on decades of British citizens’ skepticism regarding the European Union (Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017), while there is mounting evidence that attitudes toward European integration influence voting behavior at the national level—especially in countries affected by Euroskeptic polarization (De Vries 2007, 2010). Public opposition to so-called “structural adjustment programs” in developing countries stirred considerable debate and reform at the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Fox and Brown 1998; Summers and Pritchett 1993). Indictments by the International Criminal Court have been central issues in the elections and domestic politics of Kenya (Mueller 2014). Many such public debates about IOs circle around issues such as fairness, accountability, and representation—that is, central democratic characteristics. Yet the extent to which and why citizens perceive global governance to be democratic remains an open question that I now address.

Concepts and Theory

In the context of global governance, the idea of a democratic deficit is more difficult to conceptualize than for

national regimes. First and foremost, it is not straightforward on which institutions to focus in terms of their (non-)democratic characteristics. While at the nation-state level scholars can draw on people’s assessments of their national government’s democratic quality, there is no world government that we could focus on to explore potential democratic deficiencies in global politics (but see Goodin 2013). Hence, defining the very object of my inquiry proves to be challenging. I may, for instance, focus on the (non-)democratic properties of a central IO like the UN, IOs in general, global governance (Zürn 2018), or rather world politics as a whole (Agné 2022). How I define the object of inquiry is relevant because, depending on how broad or narrow my definition is, assessments of the global democratic deficit may vary. In order to minimize controversies in this respect and to lay the groundwork for future research in this area, I cover the spectrum from narrow to broad definitions by investigating democratic deficits rather narrowly with respect to IOs, but also more broadly in relation to world politics.

I concentrate on IOs as formal intergovernmental institutions with states as members (Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks 2019; Pevehouse et al. 2020). For the purposes of my inquiry focusing on citizens’ perceptions, IOs are adequate, given that they are relatively visible elements in the institutional complex of global governance. At the domestic level, public views on the democratic merits of IOs are equivalent to citizens’ views on how democratic their country’s institutions are. The counterfactuals that citizens may have in mind when evaluating the democratic quality of global governance are different IO designs or policies (Ghassim, Koenig-Archibugi, and Cabrera 2022; Hahm, Hilpert, and König 2020), or an absence of IOs.

World politics, as my broadest possible conception of the object of perceived global democratic deficiencies, may be defined as political relations and affairs between and above countries. Nye and Keohane (1971, xxiv–xxv) employ a similar definition of “world politics as all political interactions between significant actors in a world system in which a significant actor is any somewhat autonomous individual or organization that controls substantial resources and participates in political relationships with other actors across state lines. Such an actor need not be a state.”

Similar to IOs, the concept of world politics is intuitive to understand for citizens (even if its precise interpretation may vary more, given that it is less tangible than IOs). When applied to the domestic context, my conception is equivalent to asking people about democratic deficiencies in the politics of their country. Here, the counterfactual may be other conceivable world orders that are, for example, less characterized by power politics. Through my conceptualizations in terms of IOs and world politics,

I explore perceptions of a global democratic deficit in narrow and broad ways, thus limiting the possibility that my findings are merely due to the specific definition I chose.

Absolute Global Democratic Deficit

The global democratic deficit can be defined in absolute and relative terms. My concept of an absolute global democratic deficit focuses on identifying the extent to which real-world global governance falls short of the aspirational ideal of democracy. In line with common arguments in the literature (Archibugi and Held 1995), I expected that citizens worldwide generally perceive global governance to be undemocratic in absolute terms (HYPOTHESIS 1A). Despite the wealth of public opinion research on the EU (Hobolt and de Vries 2016) and other IOs (Dellmuth et al. 2022a), studies on perceived democratic characteristics of international institutions are rare (Hobolt 2012; Lee and Lim 2022). While people may support IOs overall (Council on Foreign Relations 2012), I hypothesized that they are not content with IOs' *democratic* qualities. My hypothesis thus contrasts with prior findings of a perceived democratic "*surplus*" in the European context (Hobolt 2012, 91), which were somewhat surprising given debates about democratic deficiencies of the EU. Moreover, I expected that citizens find world politics—including the power politics outside of formal IOs, as well as the participation of other actors like multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations—even more undemocratic (HYPOTHESIS 1B). This seems plausible, given that ordinary citizens presumably have even less (indirect) impact on the activities of such actors than on IOs, and since world politics may appear to follow an anarchic logic more so than the rule of law (Dahl 1999; Monteiro 2014; Waltz 1979).

Relative Global Democratic Deficits

An alternative approach is to benchmark global governance against existing democratic regimes rather than an ideal of democracy. This is what I call the concept of a *relative* global democratic deficit (see also Moravcsik 2004, 337). While Buchanan and Keohane (2006, 406) counter such a conceptualization based on real-world benchmarks, I contend that it adds valuable nuances to the extent of perceived democratic deficiencies, allowing us to put people's absolute evaluations into perspective. Indeed, in the European context, scholars have established national institutions as important benchmarks against which citizens judge the EU (Hobolt and de Vries 2016, 423). I break the concept of relative global democratic deficiencies down into three sub-types.

Minor. First, we may employ advanced democratic regimes as the benchmark for global governance's

democratic qualities, similar to previous research in the European context (Hobolt 2012, 92). I define advanced democracies as political systems in which institutions such as elections and the rule of law are relatively far developed and well entrenched (Held 2006). While advanced democracies are a reasonable benchmark, they set a high bar such that using this yardstick only allows for establishing minor democratic deficiencies.

Many scholars of global governance argue that world politics is at least somewhat democratically deficient (Dingwerth, Blauburger, and Schneider 2011). Considering that a parliament and other meaningful ways of citizen participation, as well as further democratic elements like the rule of law, are arguably lacking or deficient at the global level, I conjectured that most people perceive global governance to fall short of the standards set by advanced real-world democracies (HYPOTHESIS 2A). This would reflect prior findings of perceived democratic deficiencies of the EU when compared with the more advanced national democratic systems in Europe (Hobolt 2012, 92, 99). Besides my substantive focus on global governance more broadly, the difference between the present study and research in the European context (Rohrshneider 2002; Sánchez-Cuenca 2000) is that respondents compared international governance to their home countries, which I conceptualize and operationalize separately (refer to the subsection after the next one).

Major. One may also use less advanced, developing democracies as the point of reference. I define developing democracies as political systems in which institutions such as elections and the rule of law have emerged but are not yet fully entrenched (Held 2006). The comparison is a useful exercise because it allows for identifying shortcomings with respect to certain minimal standards set by existing democracies. Hence, if one finds that a regime falls short of the democratic standards set by less advanced democracies, one might speak of major democratic deficiencies.

Many global democracy theorists deem present-day world politics to be highly undemocratic (Archibugi 2008; Cabrera 2018; Held 1995). Given that developing democracies are generally characterized by regular elections, the rule of law, relative freedom of the press, and other democratic features, it seems that global governance falls significantly short of such standards. I expected that the lack of basic democratic institutions at the global level would also be evident to non-expert observers of the international system, so that I would find widespread perceptions of major democratic deficiencies among the international public (HYPOTHESIS 2B). Moreover, I suspected that citizens would perceive clear differences when comparing global governance's democratic quality to advanced versus developing democracies (HYPOTHESIS 2C). Once again, such findings would be

reflective of prior results at the European level, where it has been found that citizens of less advanced national democracies tended to find the EU more democratic than their home countries, whereas the opposite tended to be true for citizens of more advanced democracies (Hobolt 2012, 92, 99).

Domestic. My next concept relates the regime quality of people’s home country to the level of democracy at the global level. Similar benchmarking approaches have been developed in the context of public opinion about the EU (De Vries 2018). While possibly incoherent from a third-person perspective—in cases when people consider their home country democratic or undemocratic, contrary to standard measures (Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019)—domestic global democratic deficits may constitute the most accurate reflection of people’s subjective experience of the global system’s democratic deficiency. Other studies have argued that citizens tend to extrapolate their (lack of) trust in domestic institutions onto the EU (Anderson 1998; Janssen 1991) and other IOs (Dellmuth et al. 2022b; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2018). While they assess domestic institutional trust as an explanatory factor for confidence in IOs, the present study assumes diverging individual assessments based on domestic regimes’ democratic qualities and theorizes differences in citizens’ relative evaluations of global governance’s democratic characteristics compared to domestic regimes.

Irrespective of potential incongruences between external and subjective assessments, and in line with my earlier hypotheses about a minor and major global democratic deficit, I expected perceptions of a domestic global democratic deficit to align with expert evaluations of the democratic qualities of respondents’ home countries. That is, I hypothesized that citizens of relatively democratic countries find global governance less democratic than their country (HYPOTHESIS 3A), but that citizens of relatively undemocratic states are more positive about global governance’s democratic credentials (HYPOTHESIS 3B). Such a result would reflect prior findings in the European context where this association has been established (Hobolt 2012, 92, 99; Rohrschneider 2002; Sánchez-Cuenca 2000). Table 1 summarizes my different concepts of global democratic deficiencies.

Input and Output Aspects

While the concepts presented earlier relate to the *extent* of a global democratic deficit, now I delve deeper into the *types* of deficiencies. A classic idea in the literature on the democratic qualities of political regimes is to distinguish between *input* and *output* aspects. Since Scharpf (1999) employed the input-output distinction to discuss the democratic legitimacy of EU governance in the wake of debates about the European Union’s alleged democratic

Table 1
Definitions and conceptions of the global democratic deficit

Name	Summary
Broad	Defined in terms of world politics
Narrow	Defined in terms of international organizations
Absolute	Using democratic ideals as the benchmark
Relative	Using real-world democracies as benchmarks
Minor	Using advanced real-world democracies as the benchmark
Major	Using developing real-world democracies as the benchmark
Domestic	Using a person’s home country as the benchmark

deficit (Føllesdal and Hix 2006), it has become the standard conceptualization in this literature (Loveless and Rohrschneider 2011, 14). Other influential accounts argue for “throughput” (Schmidt 2013) as a third aspect of the legitimacy of governance institutions besides input and output, or “fairness” and “purpose” as additional elements besides procedures and performance (Dellmuth, Scholte, and Tallberg 2019, 634; Gregoratti and Stappert 2022, 122). Like related research on the EU (Hobolt 2012), I stick to the arguably more established distinction between input and output, partly to avoid conceptual overlaps between aspects such as “throughput” and “input.” For the present paper, I apply these concepts to global governance’s democratic qualities.

Input. Drawing on input considerations, a democratic system is one in which governance is ultimately based on the public will, channeled through institutions that allow for citizen participation and representation (Przeworski 1999; Schumpeter 1942). In other words, democracy requires that citizens have real choices and a say in how they are governed. According to proponents of such a conception, democracy is realized procedurally through free and fair elections between competing political candidates or parties (Dahl 1989; Norris 1999a, ch. 11).

In world politics, there is no global parliament composed of directly elected representatives. Moreover, existing IOs have only opened up to non-governmental stakeholders relatively recently and mostly through limited participation channels for civil society organizations (Tallberg et al. 2013). The form, extent, and content of such restricted participation by civil society actors is arguably not very visible to the global public, mostly known to expert audiences, and relatively limited in impact. Notwithstanding the complexities of internal processes and certain levels of autonomy that IO bureaucrats enjoy, by and large IOs arguably continue to be in the hands of their member states (Koremenos, Lipson, and

Snidal 2001). Hence, their relation and accountability to citizens is—at best—indirect via national governments, presumably leading people to feel rather distanced, disconnected, and disempowered regarding IOs and world politics more broadly. I therefore expected that citizens perceive the relative lack of public participation in global governance quite clearly, such that I would find a notable global democratic deficit from an input perspective (HYPOTHESIS 4).

Output. Evaluating democracy based on output considerations shifts the focus. In this conception, democratic systems must ensure that governance is *for* the people as well (Hobolt 2012; Munck and Verkuilen 2002; Schmidt 2013). In other words, for a political regime to be considered democratic with a view to its output aspects, it must produce instrumental benefits for its subjects, for example, in terms of ensuring minimal living standards or providing social welfare that goes beyond such standards. The extent to which output aspects should be viewed as constitutive of the democratic legitimacy of governance regimes has been much debated (Steffek 2015), especially in the EU context where some scholars argue that the EU's democratic legitimacy depends almost entirely on its output (Majone 1998), whereas others consider a focus on output misleading (Bellamy 2013).

While I am also skeptical of arguments *limiting* democratic legitimacy to output aspects, it is certainly conceivable that public perceptions of global governance's democratic legitimacy are influenced by output considerations as well. Research has shown that (expected) performance and instrumental motives are important factors in explaining perceptions of the EU's democratic qualities (Hobolt 2012), public confidence in IOs such as the United Nations (UN) (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015), and attitudes toward proposed global democratic institutions (Ghassim 2020). Indeed, as opposed to (mostly indirect and limited) avenues for public participation described earlier, IOs are frequently in the media with their statements and actions on highly visible issues in world politics, for example, the World Health Organization (WHO) during the COVID-19 pandemic or the UN during humanitarian crises. For citizens of countries that are directly implicated by IOs' actions, their statements and actions may be perceived as divisive and controversial—for example, the ICC in Kenya (Mueller 2014). Generally, however, IOs arguably tend to take relatively consensual positions on global issues on behalf of their broader membership and presumably largely endorsed by the international public. We may thus expect that citizens evaluate the actions that IOs take and the benefits they provide rather positively (HYPOTHESIS 5A).

At the same time, we may expect that citizens are less positive about the output of world politics as a whole. In global politics, there are many more actors than just IOs. Perhaps the most salient systemic characteristic of world

politics are the power differentials between countries in the international system, which constitute an essential basis or assumption of all major theories in the field of International Relations (Mingst and Arreguín-Toft 2016), and are presumably evident to any observer, including average citizens. As a result of these obvious power imbalances, benefits in international relations are arguably distributed rather unevenly. While these power dynamics certainly play out within IOs as well, they are perhaps more visible outside of them. Considering this, it thus seems likely that citizens would deem world politics in general rather undemocratic compared to IOs (HYPOTHESIS 5B).

Explanatory Factors for Perceptions of Global Democratic Deficiencies

Numerous drivers of public opinion on the democratic quality of global governance are conceivable (Hatemi et al. 2009). In the context of public opinion on the EU, scholars have concentrated on approaches relating to “utilitarian” considerations, “identity” aspects, as well as “cue-taking and benchmarking” processes (Hobolt and de Vries 2016, 419–23; Loveless and Rohrschneider 2011). Drawing on such research without any claim to comprehensiveness, my study focuses on five potential explanatory factors at the levels of countries and individuals.¹ Let me now address them in turn.

Country-level factors. First, in the European context, economic aspects have been shown to determine public support for the EU (Anderson and Kaltenthaler 1996; Carrubba 1997; Eichenberg and Dalton 1993, 2007) and perceptions of the EU's democratic quality (Hobolt 2012). Similarly, I suspected that economic aspects such as national living standards may explain public perceptions of global democratic deficiencies. Such associations could be in different directions. On the one hand, citizens of countries with higher living standards may consider present-day global governance beneficial to them and thus bearing output legitimacy. As a result, they may deem global governance more democratic than citizens of poorer countries (HYPOTHESIS 6A). On the other hand, citizens of wealthier countries may find global governance less democratic due to cost-benefit calculations (HYPOTHESIS 6B), assuming that richer countries tend to be the biggest contributors to the budgets of IOs and the largest providers of governmental foreign aid.

Second, in addition to economic aspects, political factors may explain public attitudes toward supranational governance, as has been shown in the European context (Anderson 1998; Rohrschneider and Loveless 2010). In particular, I expected that a country's regime type may explain perceptions of a global democratic deficit in different ways. For one, citizens of freer countries may find global governance more democratic (HYPOTHESIS 7A)

because they have at least some indirect participation channels, for instance, by electing national representatives who then act on their behalf in international fora. Conversely, citizens of freer countries may deem global governance less democratic (HYPOTHESIS 7B) because their participatory rights are most curtailed, relatively speaking. That is, while they do have free elections and other ways of democratic participation at the national level, such institutions are missing at the global level, so that the participative discrepancy between the domestic and international sphere is clearest for them; whereas for citizens of non-democratic countries participative avenues are limited at both the national and global levels such that they are not used to anything else. Studies of the European context have shown that public perceptions of the EU's democratic quality are indeed inversely related with the democratic qualities of national regimes (Hobolt 2012, 92, 99; Rohrschneider 2002; Sánchez-Cuenca 2000).

Third, a country's population size may explain public perceptions of global democratic deficiencies in different ways. On the one hand, a larger national population may lead citizens of such countries to view global governance as more democratic (HYPOTHESIS 8A). One reason could be that their country tends to have more say in IOs and world politics more generally, given that the most populous countries tend to be regional hegemony and often have formal or informal privileges in IOs. On the other hand, citizens of more populous countries may find global governance less democratic (HYPOTHESIS 8B). One reason may be that rights and privileges in IOs and world politics are not distributed strictly proportionally to population size, but usually follow other principles like economic power as in the case of the Bretton Woods institutions.

Knowledge. Scholars who argue that global governance is (un)democratic base their assessment on the ontological and epistemological assumptions that there are facts about the democratic qualities of the international system, and that these facts are accessible by observing world politics (Archibugi and Held 1995). If they are right, then this should be possible for any observer, including average citizens. Thus we may expect that people who know more about the facts of world politics come to similar assessments as many scholars of global governance who conclude that world politics is highly undemocratic (Held 1995). Conversely, research in the European context shows that individuals with more knowledge about the EU tend to support it more and find it more democratic (Armingeon and Ceka 2014, 95; Hakhverdian et al. 2013; Hobolt 2012, 97–99; Inglehart 1970; Karp, Banducci, and Bowler 2003). This may be since the EU is relatively democratic (Dingwerth, Blauburger, and Schneider 2011) and, in this sense, an arguably somewhat atypical IO. Yet if the link between more general knowledge and stronger support holds for other IOs, we may in fact expect greater

knowledge about world politics to lead people to find global governance more democratic.

To further tailor my argument, I thus limit it to knowledge about arguably *undemocratic* characteristics of global governance such as the permanent member states' veto rights in the UN Security Council (Bosco 2009) or the weighted voting system and leadership conventions in the Bretton Woods institutions (Lesage et al. 2013). Indeed, while there are long-standing academic debates about alleged democratic deficiencies of the EU (Bartl 2015; Goodhart 2007; Majone 1998), deficits in other IOs are essentially undisputed, even by those who argue that the EU is democratic (Moravcsik 2004, 363). I hypothesized that if and when ordinary people come to know about such features of the international system, they should be especially likely to deem global governance undemocratic (HYPOTHESIS 9). Finding such an effect would mean that more information about relevant aspects of global governance would heighten public perceptions of global democratic deficiencies.

Framing. Another potential driver of public perceptions relating to global democratic deficiencies is framing. Global governance has become increasingly contested in recent years, as populist leaders and authoritarian states have challenged existing international institutions (Posner 2017; Voeten 2020). Especially under the assumption that ordinary citizens are often not acquainted in detail with the institutional setup of global governance and other aspects that are considered democratic or undemocratic (Dellmuth 2016), framing may be an important driver of individual perceptions. Since there seems to be widespread agreement among scholars that there are immense democratic deficiencies at the global level (cf. Nye 2001), we may suspect that standard arguments on supposed global democratic deficits are more convincing than claims that global governance is in fact democratic.

One of the principal arguments for the democratic deficiency of global governance is the lack of avenues for public participation in global decision-making, since there are no institutions such as a world parliament, for instance (Falk and Strauss 2001). Conversely, a key assumption at the heart of our present-day international system and a core argument for its democratic sufficiency is that citizens are adequately represented in global governance by their national governments. We may expect the former argument to be more convincing, given the apparent scholarly consensus on the existence of a global democratic deficit. Yet studies on counter-framing effects suggest that two frames pointing in opposite directions tend to cancel each other out (cf. Chong and Druckman 2012), which may especially apply in the present context where strong public views are presumably rare. Thus, my hypothesis that common framings negatively affect perceptions of the democratic qualities of global governance, even when a negative frame is countered by a positive one (HYPOTHESIS 10), remains to be tested. All my hypotheses are summarized in table 2.

Table 2
List of hypotheses

H1A	Most citizens consider global governance undemocratic.
H1B	Citizens tend to deem world politics more undemocratic than international organizations.
H2A	Most citizens perceive a global democratic deficit compared to advanced real-world democracies.
H2B	Most citizens deem global governance's democratic quality to fall short of real-world developing democracies.
H2C	Citizens tend to view global governance as more democratic when compared to developing democracies than when benchmarking it against developed democracies.
H3A	Most citizens of freer countries consider the international system to be less democratic than their home country.
H3B	Citizens of less free countries tend to deem global governance more democratic compared to their home country than citizens of freer countries.*
H4	Most citizens consider public participation in global governance lacking.
H5A	Most citizens evaluate the outputs of international organizations positively.
H5B	Compared to evaluations of the output of international organizations, fewer citizens evaluate the output of world politics positively.
H6A	Citizens of countries with higher living standards tend to deem global governance more democratic.
H6B	Citizens of countries with higher living standards tend to consider global governance less democratic.
H7A	Citizens of freer countries tend to deem global governance more democratic.
H7B	Citizens of freer countries tend to deem global governance less democratic.
H8A	Citizens of more populous countries tend to find global governance more democratic.
H8B	Citizens of more populous countries tend to find global governance less democratic.
H9	More knowledge about undemocratic aspects of global governance tends to make citizens find it less democratic.*
H10	The combination of common arguments framing global governance as democratic versus undemocratic tends to make people less likely to consider it democratic.*

* Refer to note 2 for links to my pre-registrations.

Research Design and Methods²

In line with my definitions, I operationalized the concept of a global democratic deficit both narrowly and broadly, randomly allocating respondents to one of two different groups. I used a narrow definition by asking people to assess

the democratic deficit of IOs like the UN, the World Bank, and the WHO. I chose relatively well known and functionally diverse IOs, so that respondents would be able to state their opinion while not necessarily focusing on a single IO. I explicitly presented these institutions as *examples* of the underlying concept of IOs, so that respondents would not feel that they required expert knowledge of any of them, but instead were asked to issue their general perception of IOs' democratic qualities—analogously to evaluating a country's institutions as a whole, rather than the qualities of individual governmental branches.

In addition to IOs, I also employed a broad definition inquiring into people's views on potential democratic deficiencies in "world politics." I assume that my understanding of political affairs between and above states is implicit in the term, and thus did not specify it further—also to keep my survey relatively concise (in contrast to the pilot survey, refer to [online appendix 1](#)). While it is possible that respondents interpret my questions differently (for example, foregrounding different IOs or aspects of world politics), these operationalizations are presumably effective at motivating respondents to state their overarching assessments of global democratic deficiencies, defined narrowly and broadly.

In the survey prompts, I specified that "democratic" is defined as "representing people, for example, through free and fair elections or other ways of citizen participation." Hence, I limited the inquiry to a narrow definition of the term "democracy." By using such a definition, I refrained from adopting state-centric conceptions of democracy in the context of IOs (Lee and Lim 2022), as my analysis of relative global democratic deficiencies aims at comparisons between the national and international levels. Moreover, I did not specify underlying democratic norms such as transparency, inclusivity, or accountability, instead opting for an operationalization that let respondents use their own criteria for judging how well IOs or world politics represent citizens. However, I also decided not to leave it completely up to respondents themselves to interpret the term "democracy," given the existence of diverging and even contradictory interpretations among the international public (Kirsch and Welzel 2019).

In my main definition, I excluded controversial output considerations which would risk diluting what are more conventionally understood as central democratic characteristics. However, in the second main survey round, I also looked separately into input and output aspects of global governance's perceived democratic qualities by asking specific questions targeting these two elements, discussed after the next section.

Absolute and Relative Global Democratic Deficits

In order to investigate the existence and extent of a perceived *absolute* global democratic deficit, I asked

respondents how democratic or undemocratic they consider IOs or world politics respectively to be. By not specifying a real-world benchmark for people to base their assessment on, respondents were implicitly asked to evaluate the democratic qualities of global governance based on their perception of ideal-type democracy. As answer choices, I offered unidirectional response scales from “not democratic at all” to “completely democratic.”

I inquired about people’s perceptions of a *minor* democratic deficiency in global governance by asking respondents how democratic they deem IOs or world politics respectively to be compared to “advanced democracies like Germany.” Similarly, regarding *major* global democratic deficits, I asked respondents to evaluate IOs or world politics respectively against the benchmark set by “developing democracies like South Africa.” Evaluations could range from “much less democratic” to “much more democratic.” While one may argue that these operationalizations assume some familiarity by respondents with the political systems of the countries used as benchmarks, I believe that Germany’s and South Africa’s characterizations as *examples* of the underlying concepts of developed and developing democracies respectively provided survey participants with the necessary information for the present purpose. In the European context, scholars have relied on two separate questions about satisfaction with democracy at the national and EU levels respectively, in order to derive relative deficits indirectly (Hobolt 2012, 96). Here, I employed one question for each type of relative global democratic deficiency to obtain direct measures. [Online appendix 1](#) further discusses my operationalizations. I randomly allocated respondents to subgroups where they were asked *either* about a minor global democratic deficit or a major one, but not about both. This was intended to ensure that differences between responses to these two questions do not just arise because respondents aimed to be logically consistent in their answers, but because the two concepts are indeed capable of capturing different extents of perceived global democratic deficiencies.

My method of testing for the existence and extent of perceived *domestic* global democratic deficits resembled my approach to the other two kinds of relative democratic deficiencies that I conceptualized. I asked respondents to indicate if they deem IOs or world politics to be more or less democratic than their country of residence, that is, the survey country. I focused on the country of residence because it is likely that this is the country whose political system people generally tend to be most familiar with as it usually has the greatest impact on their daily lives. I refrained from ambiguous terms like “home country” because in cases of immigrants, in particular, it would not have been clear what the question was about—their country of origin or their country of residence.

Input and Output Aspects

Regarding input deficiencies, I asked the following question: “From your perspective, how much or little opportunity do citizens like yourself have to influence “the policies of international organizations” or, in the broad definition group, “world politics?” Based on this input perspective, global governance may be considered democratic if people generally feel that they have a say.

Of course, in any political system—including democratic ones—individual citizens only have a limited impact on public policies. The more important consideration is therefore whether citizens believe that people *like them* (for example, those of a similar political conviction) are adequately represented and sufficiently influential. Hence, similar to other surveys in different world regions (Dulani 2009, 35; Gallup 1996, 252; National Survey of Libya 2011, 27), I operationalized this conception as “citizens like yourself” rather than just “you.” While respondents’ interpretations of “citizens like yourself” may differ, I do not consider this an issue for the present purpose, given that respondents may legitimately conceptualize like-minded citizens along different dimensions (for example, nationality, social status, age, ethnicity, or political convictions), which are all valid interpretations for the present purpose of identifying an input-based global democratic deficit.

On the output side, I asked the following question: “In your opinion, to what extent are the policies of international organizations”—or “is world politics”—“to the advantage or disadvantage of citizens like yourself?” The purpose of this wording was to aim at the potential benefits or costs that global governance may cause for citizens, going to the heart of output-focused evaluations of political regimes. In order to prompt respondents to think broadly about the advantages and disadvantages that global governance provides, I intentionally kept the operationalization general, not specifying the (dis)advantages as material or otherwise.

Knowledge and Framing Experiments

To find out if more relevant knowledge causes people to deem global governance less democratic, I gave respondents the answers to three questions relating to characteristics of the international system, which are often considered undemocratic in different ways: first, the vote share system in the World Bank, which is based on economic contributions and power, rather than more conventional democratic principles such as proportional representation; second, the identity and nature of privileges of the five veto powers in the UN Security Council, which runs counter to principles such as sovereign equality that may be considered more democratic; and third, the WHO’s main funding sources, which may be considered

undemocratic due to a potential reliance on private donors and thus special interests. Exposing respondents in the knowledge treatment group to these three pieces of information allowed me to estimate the effect that more relevant knowledge has on public attitudes regarding global democratic deficiencies.

While my knowledge treatment arguably constitutes a kind of framing in itself, my second experiment (which another group was randomly assigned to) exposed respondents more classically and directly to common normative framings about global democratic deficiencies. The treatment vignettes distilled the gist of standard arguments: “Some argue that there is no public involvement in international organizations, which makes them undemocratic. Others argue that citizens are adequately represented by their national governments, which makes international organizations democratic.” In the respondent group where global governance was defined more broadly, the term “international organizations” was simply replaced by “world politics.” I exposed respondents to only one treatment with opposing frames (rather than separate treatments on global democratic deficiency versus sufficiency), in order to prevent “experimenter expectancy effects” (Sanderson 2010, 47–49), since opposed frames capture mixed messages in real-world debates more accurately, and due to practical considerations of statistical power given the available sample sizes. [Online appendices 1.3](#) and [2](#) present my knowledge and framing treatments in the second main round, while [online appendix 3](#) summarizes additional survey elements in the two main rounds.

Country Selection

I conducted the survey in 17 diverse countries across the global South, North, East, and West. Several criteria were used in the selection of survey countries. First, I wanted to include a variety of countries in terms of population size, average national income, and regime quality, due to the theoretical considerations outlined earlier. Second, I wanted my sample of countries to be as globally representative as possible, that is, geographically and culturally diverse. After conducting a pilot survey in the UK, I ran the two main rounds of survey experiments in 16 countries, for which the aforementioned characteristics are summarized in [table 3](#).

Survey Implementation

After translating the questionnaire into the target languages ([online appendix 4](#)), I programmed the survey experiments using Qualtrics. I collaborated with YouGov in 2018 for the pilot survey, Dynata in 2019 for the first main survey round, as well as Qualtrics and its partners (Cint, Dynata, Lucid, and Toluna) in 2021 for the second main survey round. Thus, my first main round took place before COVID-19 was known, while the second main

Table 3
Survey country characteristics

Country	Population	Freedom rating	GDP per capita
Argentina	45	Free	9,964
Australia	26	Free	60,445
Canada	38	Free	52,359
China	1,420	Not free	10,144
Colombia	51	Partly free	6,183
Egypt	105	Not free	3,887
France	66	Free	43,659
Hungary	10	Partly free	18,772
India	1,369	Free	2,050
Indonesia	275	Partly free	4,334
Kenya	55	Partly free	2,070
Russia	144	Not free	11,536
South Korea	52	Free	34,998
Spain	46	Free	29,582
Turkey	85	Not free	9,661
United States	329	Free	65,120

Note: Population figures are based on data from the survey years 2019 and 2021 respectively and stated in millions (United Nations 2022). Freedom ratings are the summary assessments of Freedom House for the survey years 2019 and 2021 (Freedom House 2021). In my study, I concentrate on the Freedom House data (rather than alternative measures) due to its availability for the survey years and its unambiguity offering one summary measure. GDP per capita is stated in 2015 US Dollars for the survey years 2019 and 2021 (World Bank Group 2023a).

survey was fielded in the middle of the pandemic, allowing me to examine to some extent the potential stability of or variations in views on global democratic deficiencies in times of a global crisis compared to more ordinary times. In [table 4](#), I summarize the main characteristics of my different survey rounds.

For each country, I used sampling quotas reflecting population averages for various regions, as well as age-gender groups, and—in the second main survey round—education. [Online appendices 5](#) and [6](#) provide further details on my samples and weights. The aggregate sample amounted to 41,966 respondents across the 17 survey countries (Ghassim 2024b). Due to deviations from my target quotas at the sampling stage, I used entropy balancing (Hainmueller 2012) to reweight the survey data, so that it matched the targeted quotas as closely as possible. In the pooled analyses that follow, each country sample is weighted equally rather than proportionally to population size, so that the results are not dominated by the biggest countries in the sample (especially China and India).

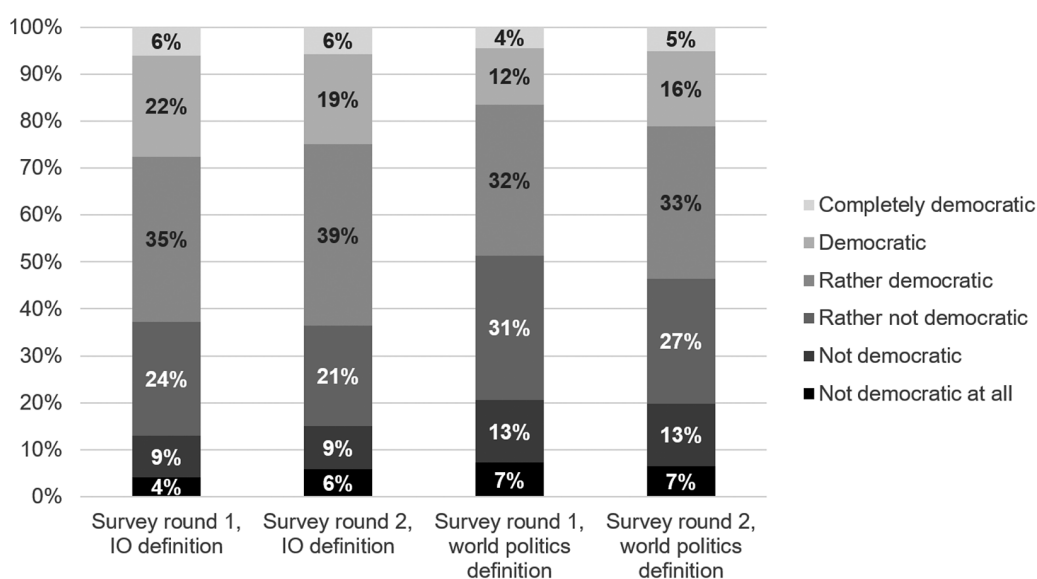
Results and Discussion

To begin with perceptions of an absolute global democratic deficit, I observe that the public, on average, does not perceive a democratic deficit when global governance

Table 4
Characteristics of the different survey rounds

Round	Main elements	Year	Countries
Pilot	Global democratic deficit questions	2018	UK
Main 1	Revised global democratic deficit questions	2019	Argentina, China, India, Russia, Spain, USA
Main 2	Revised global democratic deficit questions Input and output questions Knowledge and framing treatments	2021	Australia, Canada, Colombia, Egypt, France, Hungary, Indonesia, Kenya, South Korea, Turkey

Figure 1
Absolute global democratic deficit



Survey questions: In your view, how democratic (or not) [are international organizations / is world politics]? (refer to [online appendix 1](#) for exact wording)

Note: Introductory prompts, questions, and answer choices differed somewhat between survey rounds (refer to [online appendix 1](#) for details). Given these variations, as well as the different time periods in which the surveys were implemented, results are presented separately for the two main rounds. The figure above shows average response proportions for the two different global governance definitions. Each country sample is weighted equally. Possible deviations from 100 percent in each column, as well as between sums in the plot and reported sums in-text, are due to rounding.

Further data: Tests for statistically significant differences are provided in [online appendix 7.1](#).

is narrowly defined (figure 1). Conceptualized in terms of IOs such as the UN, World Bank, and WHO, global governance is considered rather democratic by international averages of 63% and 64% in the first and second survey rounds respectively. Positive attitudes range from 50% in Canada to 81% in India ([online appendices 10.1](#) and [10.2](#)). Positive attitudes toward IOs are captured well by a respondent’s comment in my Indonesia survey: “International organizations are quite democratic because their policies are made appropriately and transparently between government leaders throughout the world.”³

As expected, the more broadly global governance is defined, the more likely the public is to find it

democratically deficient, which is true for every country in my survey ([online appendices 10.1](#) and [10.2](#)): When defined in terms of world politics, international averages of only around half of all respondents—specifically, 49% and 54% in the first and second survey rounds respectively—find global governance rather democratic. At the country-level, attitudes range from 33% in Russia to 72% in India for those who find world politics democratic. This divided attitude with regard to world politics can be illustrated well with a respondent comment in my Hungary survey: “For me, world politics is a very diverse, multifaceted thing There are moments of it that I consider democratic and good, and there are moments that I consider very bad.”

The differences between the mean values of perceived deficiencies based on the narrow versus broad definitions in the two survey rounds are statistically significant, in line with HYPOTHESIS 1B (online appendix 7.1). This difference in attitudes toward IOs and world politics may partly be because the latter is perceived to be more subject to power politics, as illustrated in a comment by a respondent in Canada: “World politics is run by the largest of countries.” Especially noteworthy are the relatively small international average percentages of respondents who find global governance “not democratic” or “not democratic at all” across the different survey rounds and definitions. In addition, note that most attitudes on both halves of the scale lean toward the middle (that is, “rather democratic” and “rather not democratic”), indicating that public perceptions of the democratic qualities of global governance are usually not very strong. The observation of mostly weak attitudes is reminiscent of public opinion on the EU, which is often characterized by indifference or ambivalence (Stoeckel 2013), attitudes that are even more likely to apply in the present context given the yet greater distance of global governance institutions to citizens’ daily lives. Moreover, the result of an arguably surprising lack of widespread perceptions of democratic deficiencies reflect findings regarding the EU, where claims of democratic deficiencies are omnipresent, but scholars found a perceived democratic “surplus” rather than a deficit (Hobolt 2012, 91).

Overall, the results thus provide mixed evidence with respect to HYPOTHESIS 1A. When interpreting the results, it should be noted that while my minimalist definitions of IOs and world politics have the advantage of brevity, they also bear the cost that some respondents may have interpreted them differently. For instance, while I conceived different IO designs or policies as the counterfactual to my narrow specification of global democratic deficiencies, some respondents may instead have thought of an alternative world without IOs or a global dictatorship. Similarly, my broad conception of global democratic deficiencies was not further specified, so that respondents may have thought of the average country in assessing the democratic quality of “world politics.”

The results between the first and second rounds are remarkably similar, notwithstanding the fact that the first round took place pre-COVID-19, while the second round was fielded in the middle of the pandemic. This may indicate that public perceptions of global democratic deficiencies (or a lack thereof) are rather robust and not easily affected even in periods of global crises. However, given that the surveys took place in different times and diverse sets of countries, I ultimately cannot ascertain the extent to which differences or similarities between the results of the two rounds were due to the different sample compositions or fielding periods. Moreover, the pandemic and the resulting salience of IOs such as the WHO are only one of many factors that could conceivably have

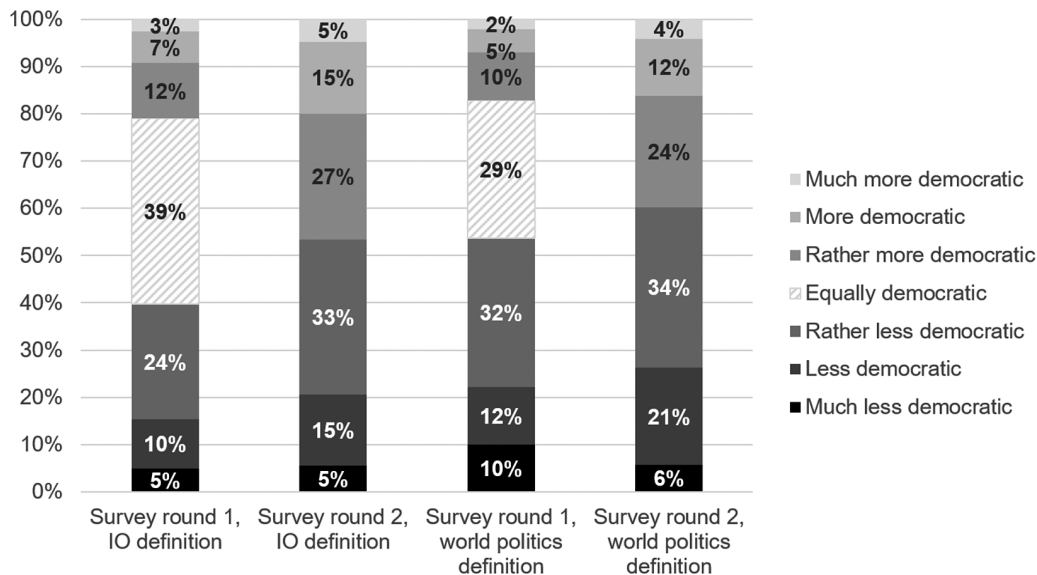
affected public perceptions on global democratic deficiencies between my first and second survey rounds, even if they had been fielded as panel surveys in the same countries on the same sets of respondents.

Moving on to my conception of a *minor* global democratic deficit, we see across both survey rounds that, based on international averages, (relative) majorities of respondents find global governance (rather) undemocratic when compared to advanced real-world democracies such as Germany (figure 2), which is in line with HYPOTHESIS 2A. This is true both for my narrow and broad conception of a global democratic deficit. When global governance is defined in terms of IOs, in the first and second survey round, (relative) majorities of 40% and 53% respectively find global governance to be democratically deficient at the international average.⁴ At the country-level, negative attitudes range from 27% in India to 65% in Turkey who deem IOs less democratic than advanced democracies (online appendices 10.3 and 10.4). A comment in my Indonesia survey serves to illustrate public sentiment in this regard: “Germany is much more democratic than international organizations where the voices of minority groups such as the Green Party can influence state policy.”

The finding holds *a fortiori* when global governance is conceptualized more broadly in terms of world politics—as reflected in almost every survey country: At the international average, absolute majorities of 54% and 61% respectively deem global governance democratically deficient when conceptualized broadly and compared to advanced real-world democracies.⁵ Negative attitudes range from 40% in Indonesia to 75% in Hungary finding world politics less democratic than advanced national democracies (online appendices 10.3 and 10.4). As before, the differences between the international mean values of perceived deficiencies based on the narrow versus broad definitions in the two survey rounds are statistically significant (online appendix 7.2), in line with HYPOTHESIS 1B.

The results confirm that most people perceive at least a minor global democratic deficit, and once again confirms the finding that perceptions of democratic deficiencies intensify the more broadly global governance is defined. It should be noted, though, that my questions could be interpreted differently. For instance, even people who deem global governance more democratic than advanced democracies like Germany might perceive global democratic deficiencies. Their reasoning may be that existing global governance institutions—albeit undemocratic overall—are more democratically adequate institutions to address global issues than *national* democratic institutions (no matter how advanced they are), given the latter’s inherently limited constituencies. If such interpretations were widespread, the results here would imply even greater (minor) global democratic deficiencies than suggested earlier.

Figure 2
Minor global democratic deficit



Survey questions: In your view, [are international organizations / is world politics] more or less democratic compared to advanced democracies like Germany? (refer to [online appendix 1](#) for exact wordings)

Note: Refer to the notes below [figure 1](#).

Further data: Tests for statistically significant differences are provided in [online appendix 7.2](#).

Next, when conceptualized in relation to developing democracies in the real world, we observe that most citizens internationally do not perceive global governance to be democratically deficient ([figure 3](#)). Based on the narrow conception of a democratic deficit in IOs, absolute majorities of 59% and 67% at the international average in survey rounds one and two respectively find global governance *more* democratic than developing democracies like South Africa, which contrasts with HYPOTHESIS 2B. At the country level, positive attitudes regarding IOs’ democratic qualities compared to developing democracies range from 47% in the United States to 76% in Kenya ([online appendices 10.5 and 10.6](#)).

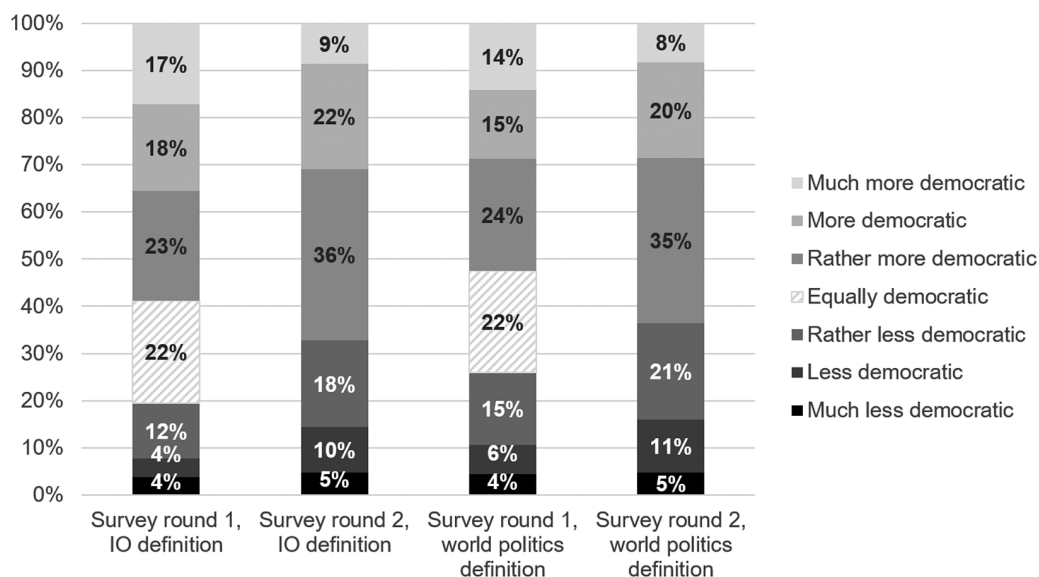
The result holds when global governance is conceptualized more broadly—at the international level and in almost all survey countries. In the first and second survey rounds, international majorities of 53% and 63% respectively find world politics to be more democratic than developing democracies like South Africa. Positive attitudes range from 41% in the United States to 78% in Egypt deeming world politics more democratic than developing democracies ([online appendices 10.5 and 10.6](#)). These findings thus do not confirm my expectation that global governance is considered to have major democratic deficiencies (HYPOTHESIS 2B), in the sense that it would be less democratic than developing democracies like South Africa. Indeed, the finding here further corroborates the relatively low percentages of respondents who find

global governance “not democratic at all” in absolute terms ([figure 1](#)).

Once again confirming HYPOTHESIS 1B, the differences between the mean values of perceived deficiencies based on the narrow versus broad definitions in the two survey rounds are statistically significant ([online appendix 7.3](#)). Moreover, the differences between perceptions of minor and major global democratic deficits are statistically significant for both the narrow and broad definitions in both main survey rounds ([online appendices 7.4 and 7.5](#)), in line with HYPOTHESIS 2C.⁶ Thus, these two relative conceptions are validated as capturing different extents of the global democratic deficit. In comparing global governance’s democratic quality to the regime quality of developing democracies like South Africa, at least some respondents followed my implicit instructions to weigh different levels of deficiencies against each other, as shown by a respondent in South Korea commenting on contemporary events: “I think the level of democracy is low, as evidenced by the riots in South Africa. In comparison, international organizations are incompetent and inefficient, but have a democratic structure to some extent.”

When conceptualized in relation to the level of democracy in their home countries, the results in the two survey rounds turn out as expected. In line with my findings on the minor and major global democratic deficit shown earlier, the results on perceptions of a domestic global

Figure 3
Major global democratic deficit



Survey questions: In your view, [are international organizations / is world politics] more or less democratic compared to developing democracies like South Africa? (refer to [online appendix 1](#) for exact wording)

Note: Refer to the notes below [figure 1](#).

Further data: Tests for statistically significant differences are provided in [online appendix 7.3](#).

democratic deficit appear to be associated with the democratic quality of respondents' home countries ([figure 4](#)). Dividing the 16 survey countries into eight that are "free" according to Freedom House and eight that are "partly free" or "not free" ([table 3](#)), I observe that citizens' perceptions of global governance's democratic quality compared to their home country seems to be associated with their country's own democratic qualities. Across the two main survey rounds, relative international majorities of 45% and 50% in "free" countries find IOs and world politics respectively to be less democratic than their home countries, conforming to HYPOTHESIS 3A. Meanwhile, in countries rated "partly free" or "not free," absolute majorities of 63% and 62% find IOs and world politics respectively to be more democratic than their home countries, in line with HYPOTHESIS 3B.

At the country level, results range from only 29% and 33% in Canada who find IOs and world politics respectively to be (rather/much) more democratic than their home country, up to 75% and 79% in Egypt and Kenya who find world politics and IOs respectively to be more democratic than their home country ([online appendices 10.7 and 10.8](#)). The distinction is captured well by a respondent in Kenya reflecting on democracy in their country, as well as the example of Germany that I provided, compared to IOs (thereby also providing some evidence for the reasonableness of my survey questions): "Compared to Kenya, the UN agencies are more

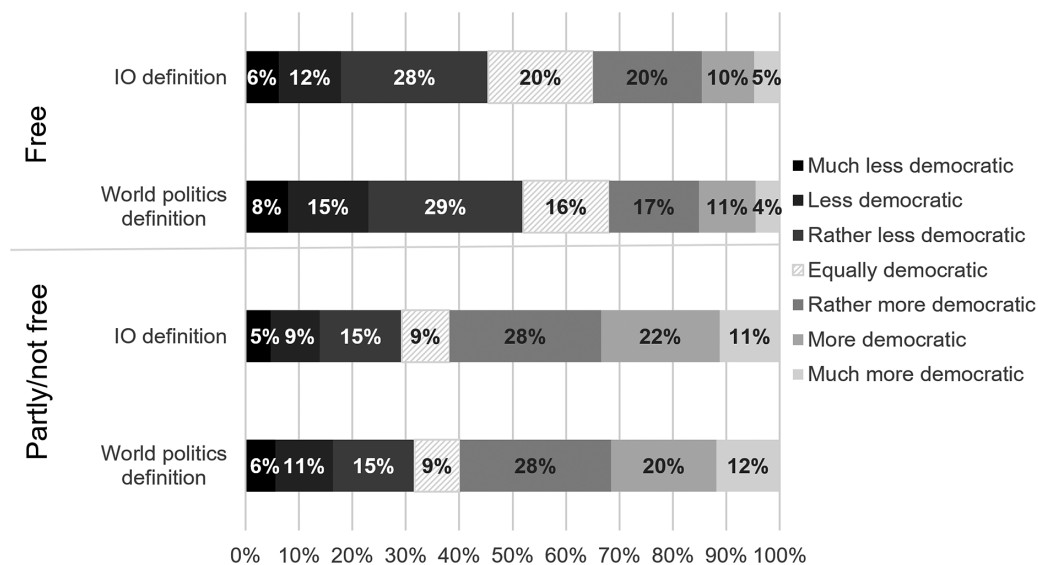
democratic. They mostly abide by their universal rules and try to be inclusive of the members. However, the veto powers still heavily influence the decisions of these institutions and that's why advanced countries like Germany could have more democracy as it has achieved equal representation and other democratic features."

Despite widespread authoritarian notions of democracy (Kirsch and Welzel 2019), these findings conform to my results on the major and minor global democratic deficit mentioned earlier: While citizens worldwide generally deem global governance to fall short of the high standard set by the most developed real-world democracies, people consider IOs and world politics as a whole to exceed the democratic quality of less developed democracies and autocracies—whether they live there themselves or not. These results reflect prior findings in the context of the EU where citizens of less democratic countries in Eastern and Southern Europe with lower-quality national governance institutions tend to be relatively more satisfied with democracy in the EU (compared to democracy in their home country) than citizens of more democratically advanced Northern and Western countries (Hobolt 2012, 92, 97–99)

Input and Output Perceptions

Let me now delve deeper into input and output aspects of global democratic deficiencies. Average perceptions of input-

Figure 4
Domestic global democratic deficit, split by survey countries' freedom ratings



Survey questions: In your view, [are international organizations / is world politics] more or less democratic compared to [survey country]? (refer to [online appendix 1](#) for exact wording)
Notes: The figure shows average proportions in each response category across both survey rounds, weighting each country sample equally, and split by Freedom House ratings ([table 3](#)).

related democratic qualities are remarkably robust across both the narrow and broad definitions of global governance ([figure 5](#)). When conceptualized in terms of IOs and world politics, 73% and 72% respectively across countries in the second survey round stated that citizens like themselves have little influence on global governance, as expected in HYPOTHESIS 4. As [online appendix 8.1](#) shows, the difference in means between the narrow and broad global governance conceptions is not statistically significant. Moreover, note here that the “very little” input category constitutes the plurality of responses across countries ([figure 5](#)).

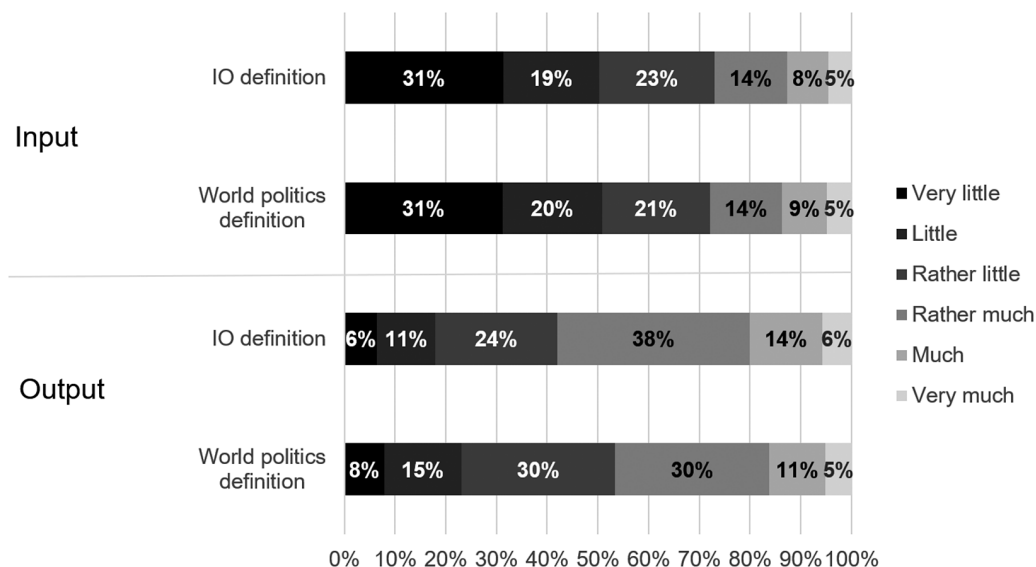
At the country level, negative attitudes on input to IOs range from 42% in Egypt to 95% in Hungary. Regarding world politics, negative attitudes range from 46% in Egypt to 96% in Hungary thinking that citizens have little opportunity for influence ([online appendix 10.9](#)). The negative public sentiment regarding the input qualities of IOs is expressed well by a respondent in my Kenya survey: “I have never witnessed a situation in Kenya where citizens have been asked to give their views, improvements, etc., on international organizations. It would be a good thing for citizens to feel actively involved in how these organizations are run/managed because whatever the organizations do directly affects citizens who have no say in them.” Regarding world politics, one respondent in Turkey simply summarized his apparently widely shared sentiment as follows: “I don’t think we can contribute to world politics as individuals.”

My findings suggest—as expected—that people generally perceive a global democratic deficit based on input considerations and that a strong perception of a deficit in this respect is indeed widespread. The divergence compared to my main results on the global democratic deficit may be explained by people’s implicit associations with the term “democratic” that I employed in my questions on absolute and relative global democratic deficiencies. Even though I explicitly defined “democratic” in terms of citizen participation, it may be that respondents evaluated democracy in IOs and world politics from other perspectives as well. For instance, as noted, some people may hold a state-centered perspective on democracy in IOs, rather than citizen-centered one (Lee and Lim 2022).

Another explanation for the results here is that people generally feel like they cannot influence politics much—neither at the global level nor at the national level. Thus, the high percentages of input-related deficiencies would not be specific to *global* governance, but observable in any governance system. This line of thought is evident in the following comment by a respondent in my Australia survey: “Only people in politics and the rich have a say, us citizens can vote but each person is 1/1000000 with a small voice.”

Lastly, one may note that my question asked about the extent of opportunities for people to influence IOs or world politics; and if people deem it democratically justified that citizens should not have much opportunity to influence global governance, then my finding of

Figure 5
Input- and output-related global democratic deficit



Survey questions: “From your perspective, how much or little opportunity do citizens like yourself have to influence [the policies of international organizations / world politics]?” and “In your opinion, to what extent [are the policies of international organizations / is world politics] to the advantage or disadvantage of citizens like yourself?” (refer to [online appendix 1.3](#))

Note: Refer to the notes below [figure 1](#). These data are from the second main survey round in which the input and output questions were included ([table 4](#)).

Further data: Tests for statistically significant differences are provided in [online appendix 8.1](#).

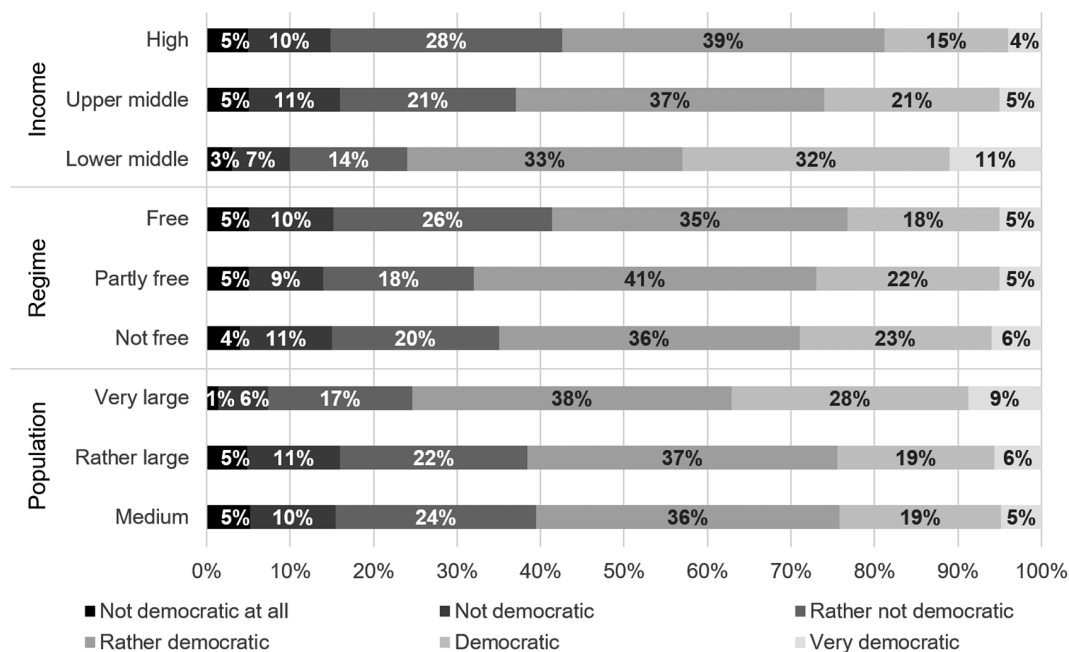
widespread input deficiencies do not per se indicate democratic deficiencies. Conversely, the results here may be taken as most indicative of widespread public perceptions concerning global democratic deficiencies, given that respondents may interpret the absolute and relative questions with different reference points in mind, for example, a world without IOs (see ms. p. 11).

The picture changes significantly with respect to output considerations ([figure 5](#)): While an average of 58% of citizens across the ten countries in the second survey round consider the policies of IOs to be to their advantage, perceptions are not exclusively positive—partly due to contemporary events, as the following comment from my Colombia survey in 2021 illustrates: “Unfortunately, the WHO has NOT been of any use in the pandemic.” At the country level, positive attitudes about IOs’ outputs range from 34% in Colombia to 78% in Egypt ([online appendix 10.10](#)). Meanwhile, an international average of 53% deem world politics as a whole to be to their disadvantage ([figure 5](#)). At the country level, negative attitudes about world politics’ output range from 35% in Egypt to 69% in Colombia. As [online appendix 8.1](#) shows, the difference in means between the narrow and broad global governance conceptions is highly statistically significant. We may therefore conclude that the output-based democratic quality of global governance depends on how broadly it is conceived.

Output perceptions of IOs tend to be relatively positive (in line with HYPOTHESIS 5A), whereas output perceptions of world politics as a whole tend to be rather negative (in line with HYPOTHESIS 5B), thus helping to explain greater perceptions of a global democratic deficit when defined more broadly. In general, output perceptions are significantly more positive than input perceptions, which helps explain the relatively positive public views of global governance’s democratic qualities overall. Indeed, [online appendices 8.2 and 8.3](#) show that citizens’ perceptions of a global democratic deficit (based on my narrow and broad conceptions) are more strongly associated with perceived output qualities of global governance than with perceptions of its input qualities—a finding that contrasts with research on the EU’s perceived democratic qualities where procedural (that is, input) aspects have been found to be more important (Hobolt 2012, 89).

One interpretation of these findings is that input aspects are not so important for citizens’ overall evaluations of global governance’s democratic qualities as long as basic standards are fulfilled (for example, national governments having a say on citizens’ behalf), and so long as people deem global governance’s outputs in terms of public goods acceptable. At the same time, this output-dependence—without clear links to input channels and public appreciation thereof—may place IOs in a delicate position, given

Figure 6
Absolute global democratic deficit (IO definition) by country type



Note: The categories for national income levels are based on the World Bank Group's (2023b) official categorizations. Regime types are based on Freedom House's (2021) categories. Population data comes from the United Nations (2022), and is split into the three categories at the cutoffs of 65 million and 1 billion inhabitants.

that national governments have incentives to claim successes for themselves while blaming IOs for failures. Lastly, one may argue that the global democratic deficit's essence from an output perspective is that IOs' competence domains are too restricted. Thus, while the international public on average perceives that IOs bring advantages, they could benefit even more if IOs' functional remit was broadened (Fabre, Douenne, and Mattauch 2023; Ghasim, Koenig-Archibugi, and Cabrera 2022), which would thus imply global democratic output deficiencies despite the apparent public content regarding existing IOs.

Country Characteristics as Explanatory Factors

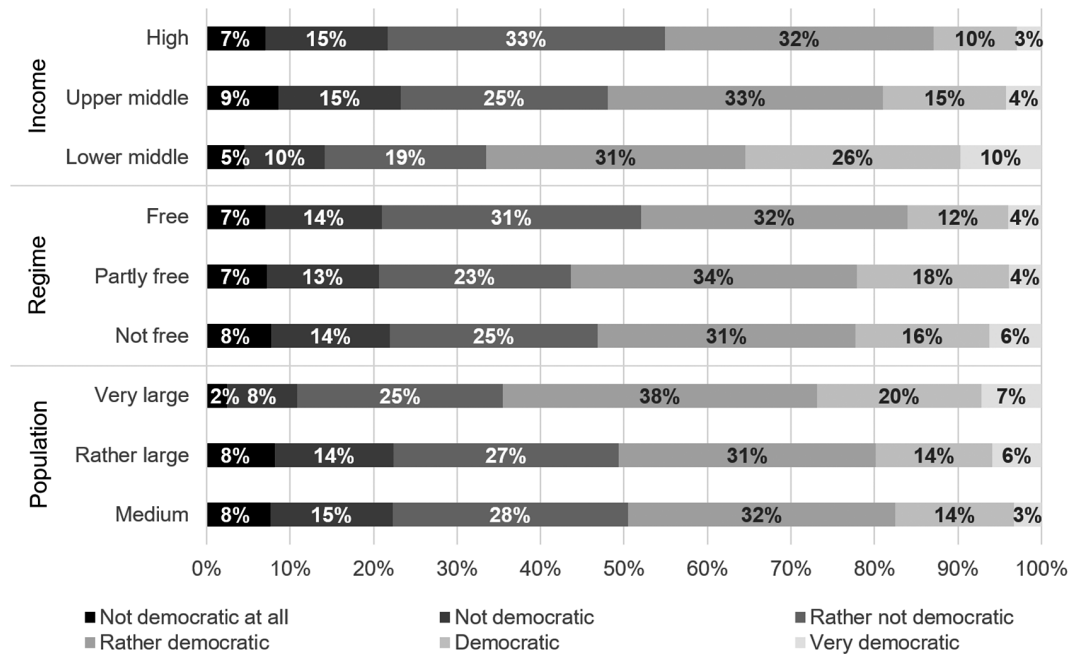
Moving on to my exploration of country characteristics as possible explanatory variables for public perceptions of global democratic deficiencies (or a lack thereof), I concentrate on three factors: economic power, regime type, and population size. Figure 6 shows the results for perceptions of an absolute global democratic deficit based on my narrow definition in terms of IOs, while figure 7 presents the findings for my broader definition in terms of world politics.

First, I observe that perceptions of global democratic deficiencies seem to be positively associated with countries' income categories—a finding that appears to hold for both

the narrow and broad definitions. While my multivariate ordered logistic regressions with country fixed effects do not confirm these associations (online appendix 11.1), the finding is corroborated by my analysis of global democratic input deficiencies, perceptions of which also increase along with countries' average income levels (online appendix 11.2). However, the picture is somewhat complicated by my analysis of output deficiencies (online appendix 11.3): Citizens from high income countries are more likely to find global governance (defined both narrowly and broadly) democratically deficient than people from lower-middle income countries, but less likely than citizens of upper-middle income countries. In my univariate regression analyses, GDP per capita is positively and significantly associated with output quality, while the association is reversed when controlling for freedom scores and population size. In general, the results from these different analyses arguably tend toward the finding of more widespread public perceptions of global democratic deficiencies as national income levels increase (in line with HYPOTHESIS 6B). This may be due to cost-benefit calculations, as citizens of richer countries believe that they contribute more than what they get in return from IOs and world politics.

Second, my analyses appear to show that the correlation between regime type and perceptions of global democratic deficiencies is not linear, but that citizens in the freest

Figure 7
Absolute global democratic deficit (world politics definition) by country type



Note: Refer to the notes below figure 6.

countries find global governance least democratic—a finding that again seems to hold for both the narrow and broad definitions of global governance (figures 6 and 7). Once again, however, my regression analyses do not confirm the statistical significance of this finding (online appendix 11.1). The association between freedom in a country and perceptions of global democratic deficiencies seems to hold in my input and output analyses as well (online appendices 11.2 and 11.3), although the “partly free” countries tend to cluster with “free” countries rather than “not free” countries as in the analyses of absolute global democratic deficits. Yet again the regression analyses with country fixed effects paint a more diverse picture with significant associations in different directions (online appendices 11.2 and 11.3, respectively). Thus, the evidence is once more mixed—with a tendency toward a (bivariate) negative association between domestic freedoms and perceptions of global democratic deficiencies (in line with HYPOTHESIS 7B). Such inverse perceptions of national and supranational institutions have been perceived in the EU context as well (Sánchez-Cuenca 2000). One interpretation is that citizens in freer countries are most discontent with the curtailment of their participative rights in global governance compared to domestic politics.

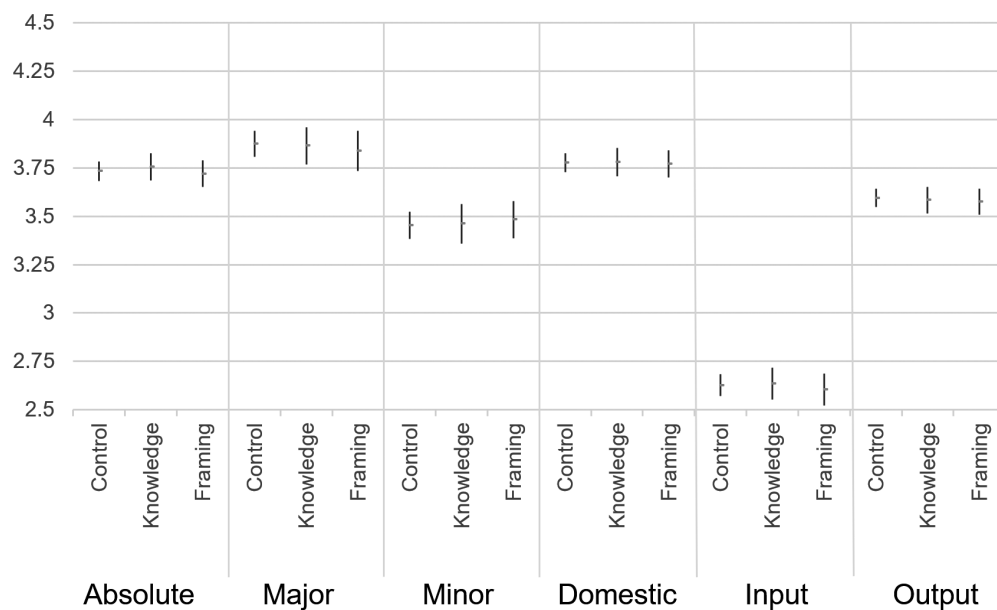
Third, my analyses appear to show that the more populous a country, the more democratic citizens find global governance. This association appears in my analyses of absolute global democratic deficiencies, although here it

is only citizens of “very large” countries (that is, China and India) who clearly perceive global governance to be more democratic—both narrowly and broadly defined (figures 6 and 7). While my regressions do not corroborate the significance of this finding (online appendix 11.1), the input analyses in online appendix 11.2 provide further evidence for this result by showing that citizens in more populous countries perceive more input opportunities in global governance. Lastly, with regard to output deficiencies, this positive association is only evident in the broader definition of a global democratic deficit with respect to world politics, not when more narrowly defined in terms of IOs, and my regression analyses once more complicate the picture with significant associations in different directions (online appendix 11.3). Overall, there is mixed evidence for a positive association between national population size and perceptions of global democratic qualities (in line with HYPOTHESIS 8A). One interpretation is that citizens in larger countries may find global governance more democratic because they feel that their country has more sway in international institutions as a result of its size.

Knowledge and Framing as Drivers of Perceptions

The principal result of my knowledge and framing experiments is that, in my pooled analysis across all survey countries, there are no main treatment effects—contrary to HYPOTHESES 9 AND 10 (figures 8 and 9). Disaggregating

Figure 8
Knowledge and framing treatment effects, IO definition



Notes: The plot shows the control and treatment groups for different conceptions of the global democratic deficit in the second main survey round. The y-axis represents parts of the six-point scales for the different questions, with 3.5 constituting the middle. The plot shows the point estimate and 95% confidence interval of each experimental condition. None of the differences-in-means between the treatment and control groups is statistically significant at conventional levels. [Online appendix 9](#) contains the detailed data and results of each experiment.

the analyses by countries, there are instances in which significant differences between control and treatment groups are observable—both in expected and unexpected directions ([online appendices 10.11](#) and [10.12](#)). Yet, as in the cross-country analyses, most treatments do not yield any significant results at the country level.

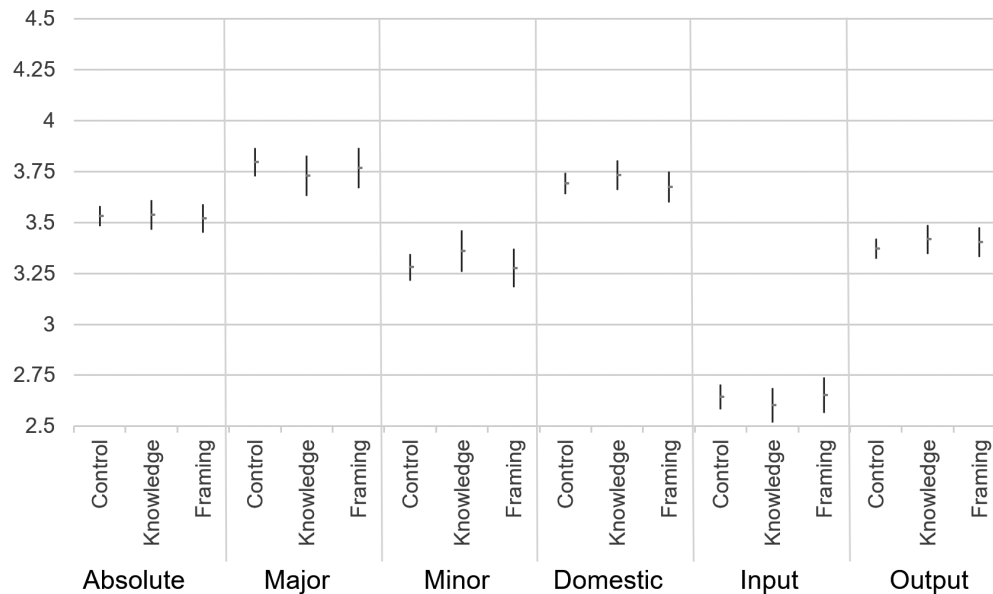
Regarding the first experiment, the aggregate null findings are especially surprising in light of the fact that knowledge has been shown to be a significant factor in the context of public attitudes toward the EU (Karp, Banducci, and Bowler 2003). One interpretation is that the treatment was not strong enough to capture the supposed effects of greater knowledge about undemocratic characteristics of global governance on perceptions of global democratic deficiencies. Indeed, my experiment does not test the effect of greater relevant knowledge more broadly, but rather the specific effect of three pieces of information about global governance (some of which respondents may already be aware of). Another possible reason for the null result is that citizens’ assessments of global governance as not highly undemocratic reflects their general support for international organizations and cooperation, as well as the output benefits they perceive (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2014). Democratic deficit perceptions may thus be somewhat decoupled from specific institutional characteristics that scholars point to when they highlight democratic deficiencies in global governance.

Lastly, it may be that the treatments do not provide knowledge that is relevant to people’s views on global democratic deficiencies. For example, while people may already know and have formed their judgment based on the fact that delegates at the UN are not directly elected, membership and veto powers in the Security Council may not be relevant to their views on a global democratic deficit. However, respondent comments such as this one from my Egypt survey illustrate that my chosen knowledge treatments are relevant for at least some people’s perceptions of global democratic deficiencies: “The right of veto makes decisions apply only to small countries. Thus, there is no democracy in the United Nations system, especially the Security Council.”

Similarly, framing the debate around the supposed global democratic deficit, as it often is, does not affect citizens’ perceptions of a global democratic deficit along any of my measures in the cross-country analysis. Yet the arguments provided do resonate with some respondents, as evidenced by the following comment in my survey in France reflecting on IOs: “These organizations operate with member countries and their official representatives. These are not all democratically elected as we understand in France and Europe.”

One potential explanation for the observed null effect at the aggregate level is that the arguments for the democratic deficiency and sufficiency of global governance cancel each

Figure 9
Knowledge and framing treatment effects, world politics definition



Note: Refer to the notes below figure 8.

other out. Indeed, this neutralization effect is what scholars have observed in other experiments with opposing frames (cf. Chong and Druckman 2012). Another possible explanation is that the treatments were—yet again—not strong enough. It seems conceivable that a broad debate on global democratic deficiencies would bear greater potential to affect public attitudes in this respect, since the arguments on both sides would be elaborated more clearly than possible within my limited survey experiment. Nonetheless, given the findings, I conclude that public views of global governance’s democratic qualities are more stable than anticipated and—by and large—not affected by two factors that are thought to be influential.

Conclusion

This paper addressed one of the central issues of our age: the global democratic deficit. Exploring perceptions of global democratic deficiencies by the international public, I differentiated between absolute and relative notions. An absolute global democratic deficit exists when world politics falls short of an ideal of democracy; while a relative global democratic deficit refers to global governance not achieving certain benchmarks of existing democratic systems. Moreover, I distinguished between input and output aspects of global governance’s democratic legitimacy, and theorized explanatory factors at the levels of countries and individuals. Between 2018 and 2021, I conducted original survey experiments on almost 42,000 citizens in 17 diverse countries.

My results indicate that only a minority of citizens worldwide find *international organizations* undemocratic, while attitudes are more balanced concerning the broader notion of *world politics*. Relatively few respondents consider global governance highly undemocratic. While people generally deem global governance to fall short of the standards set by advanced democracies (which I interpret as perceptions of minor global democratic deficiencies), on average they consider the international system to be more democratic than developing democracies (which I interpret as lacking perceptions of major global democratic deficiencies). When dissected into input and output, it becomes clear that citizens generally value global governance more for the latter than the former. Indeed, focusing on input aspects, overwhelming international majorities find that they have (very/rather) little influence on IOs and world politics. Citizens of more populous, less free, and less wealthy countries tend to find global governance more democratic. Lastly, public perceptions of the democratic quality of global governance are unaffected by knowledge and framing treatments, thus proving to be quite robust.

My study carries important implications for world politics. The findings help explain why global democracy advocates have thus far arguably failed to capture the same level of mass support as other activists—perhaps partly due to the greater priority of challenges such as climate change. Thus, my results carry important lessons for advocates, given that schemes for democratizing global governance are ultimately aimed at the public good. Since people worldwide appear to be relatively content with current

IOs from an output perspective, global governance reform advocates have much work to do in convincing citizens and ultimately policymakers that the institutional changes they call for are indeed necessary. My study suggests that such advocates could try to seize positive output evaluations, arguing that IOs should be granted more power since their performance is evaluated positively. Moreover, global governance reform advocates may tap into widespread public dissatisfaction with input aspects of global governance, as well as perceived (output) deficiencies when considering the international system more broadly.

Finally, this study contributes to vibrant academic debates and points to avenues for future research. In marked contrast to scholars who establish the existence and extent of a global democratic deficit (Archibugi and Held 1995), my results show that respondents mostly tend to find present-day IOs (rather) democratic. One possible explanation is that citizens—like many scholars (e.g., Dahl 1999)—may use different criteria to evaluate the democratic quality of global governance than they do when assessing national governance (Lee and Lim 2022). In any case, the divergence between scholarly assessments and citizens' views should be considered when evaluating the democratic qualities of global governance and their potential consequences. In this context, a sizeable and growing body of scholarship has focused on the perceived legitimacy of present-day global governance institutions (Dellmuth and Schlipphak 2020), finding attitudinal gaps between citizens and elites (Dellmuth et al. 2022a, 2022b), identifying trust in domestic institutions as an explanatory factor (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2018), and studying the impact of elite cues (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2021; Ghassim 2024a). The present study adds important facets to prior findings that international publics consider IOs relatively legitimate (Council on Foreign Relations 2012). That is, such legitimacy beliefs may be linked to perceptions of IOs as rather democratic, which in turn is associated more with output considerations than input merits.

Last but not least, the relative lack of perceived global democratic deficiencies with regard to present-day IOs should not be taken to question consistent findings in other studies that show widespread and overwhelming (if latent) support by citizens worldwide for far-reaching reforms of IOs such as the UN (Ghassim, Koenig-Archibugi, and Cabrera 2022) up to the establishment of democratic global institutions (Fabre, Douenne, and Mattauch 2023; Ghassim 2020; Ghassim and Pauli forthcoming). People may well find present-day global governance relatively democratic, while desiring even more representative and accountable international institutions. Nevertheless, squaring the apparent worldwide public support for more authoritative and democratic global institutions with the lack of strong perceptions that present-day international organizations are undemocratic is an important task for future research in this area.

Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724000987>.

Data Replication

Data replication sets are available on the Harvard DataVerse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/TMVG91>.

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Notes

- 1 Beyond the factors that I study here, my ongoing work relates to other individual-level drivers such as people's personal experience, cultural values, and political leaning.

- 2 My pre-registration documents are available at <https://aspredicted.org/p4nr5.pdf>, <https://aspredicted.org/zg8yt.pdf>, <https://aspredicted.org/ka2fu.pdf>, <https://aspredicted.org/9ux6b.pdf>, <https://aspredicted.org/hx9in.pdf>, and <https://aspredicted.org/ww7ga.pdf>.
- 3 The replication data provide respondents' comments in their original languages.
- 4 In the first survey round using the narrow definition of IOs, this relative international majority opinion (40%) is only slightly larger than the proportion of respondents choosing the option "equally democratic" (39%). The latter option was dropped in the second main round (refer to [online appendix 1](#) for an explanation). In main round 2, a (slight) absolute majority (53%) deemed IOs (rather/much) less democratic than advanced democracies.
- 5 In only two of the survey countries (South Korea and Turkey), respondents deem IOs slightly less democratic than world politics on average when compared to advanced democracies ([online appendix 10.4](#)).
- 6 Egypt is the only survey country where IOs are perceived as less democratic than world politics compared to developing democracies ([online appendix 10.6](#)).

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