

# Multilateralism: Theoretical Perspectives on the Policy Framework

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## Abstract

Multilateralism is relatively new concept in the world politics and became extensively used in the post-World War II era. While some theorists referred to multilateralism as the global governance, others linked multilateralism to internationalism, world order and international politics (Bouchard, Peterson, & Tocci, 2013). The aim of this paper is to examine some key multilateral policies' theoretical frameworks and see how different theorists analyzed multilateral policies and multilateral activities. The paper concludes by highlighting several issues related to the different theoretical frameworks to multilateralism emphasizing the limitations of the majority of these frameworks. Nevertheless, the institutional approach to multilateralism clearly identifies the state behavior and recognizes the role of the institution in shaping the social identity of multilateral institutions. Additionally, the institutional approach was inclusive in explaining the Western identity of these organizations and the cultural approach to the actors' behavior.

**Keywords:** Multilateralism, Global Governance, Political Economy, Institutionalism, Member States

## Multilateralism

The notion of multilateralism refers to global community, international and regional institutions like the United Nations (UN), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Multilateral policies have little coverage in the policy literature. This can be explained by the reality that multilateral organization and its role emerged within the globalization era in the last two decades. This field is still growing and the focus on multilateral organizations became a trend in the policy studies. This emphasis on overview tends to reinforce that Multilateralism is really based on few core issues such as collective agreements and international regimes where the states are actors involved in an activity that may take different forms for different purposes and to different extents (McRae, Wilson, & Anderson, 2015). International regimes and multilateral organizations plays major role in the public policy analysis field. In his work, "When does power listen to truth? A constructivist approach to the policy process", Haas (2004) emphasized the role of science in multilateral policies and how scientific approach of policy analysis in multilateral environment governance can be transferred to the public policy analysis on the national level. Therefore, multilateral policies may not be in the core of public policies but in the current era of globalization and the supranational powers, multilateral policies directly influence the lives of public in different areas related to security, trade, environment, and agriculture. John O. McGinnis (2000) in his work "The Political Economy of Global Multilateralism" emphasized the role of multilateral policies on the national level stating that "Multilateralism affects nations and their citizens less directly than domestic constitutive structure... multilateralism does have some effects on the participating nations and that those effects flow from the content of those multilateral agreements" (p. 382).

Robert O. Keohane (1990) began his article, "Multilateralism: An agenda for research", with clear and concise definition of multilateralism. Multilateralism refers to "coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions" (Keohane, 1990, p.731). In this context multilateral institution promote coordination between states' national policies. This coordination may take different forms within the multilateral institution, either the international regime form, at which state actor will establish an institution with explicit rules and procedures agreed upon the different state, or the bureaucratic organizational form, at which employees are assigned specific professional roles to run and manage the multilateral body (Keohane, 1990). John G. Ruggie (1992) went further in defining multilateralism while criticizing Keohane's limitations in his definition as it "obscure[s] the qualitative dimension" of multilateral institution forms (p.570). Multilateral forms of institutions became a generic feature of the international system. Therefore, multilateral institutions are the main criteria of the post-World War II era. The number of multilateral institutions went from fewer than 100 to over 600 only between 1945 and 1980 (Keohane, 1990). In his work, *Foreign Policy: A Theoretical Introduction*, Yunus (2003) explains the emergence of these organizations as a necessity when there is an issue that no single state can arrange it individually. He explained the rise of multilateral organizations based on four main factors. Different political, economic, cultural and technical issues needed global order to regulate it rather than the anarchy that may take place to solve the same issues. Second, the recent changes in the international society where states can no longer act in its own behalf necessitated the emergence of international organizations to protect the collective interest. Third, wars disappearance as an instrument had also contributed to the rise of multilateral institutions to regulate the world order and place diplomacy to end conflicts between nations. Finally, the old principles of defense, mobilization, and counter

attack in the presence of destructive power of nuclear weapons needed multilateral institutions such as the United Nations to regulate the military security (Yunus, 2003). These concepts and definitions of multilateralism are often studied in the realm of international politics and focus on the concept rather than the dynamics and policy making in these institutions. In the following sections, the issues that are related to the different regulations and decisions in multilateral institutions, and how these institutions contribute to shaping the world system through the interactions with its states members are discussed further.

### **Multilateralism-Rational Choice and Hegemonic Stability Theories**

The discussion on multilateral organizations and its policies from theoretical perspective dominates many journals that focus on International Organizations. One of the most influential works on the theory of multilateral policies is the work of James A. Caporasa "International Relations Theory and Multilateralism: The Search for Foundations". In his work, he proposed three theoretical frameworks to explain multilateral policy processes. His first route to explain multilateral policies was based on what he referred to the "individualist paradigm" in which states are rational, self-interested and utility maximizing (Caporaso, 1993, p. 604). Policy shaped and formulated so different states interests, capabilities and strategies must interact with each other through contractual relations to benefit individual actors (Caporaso, 1993).

In this context, policy decision making aims at maximizing the solutions for the international system problems through multilateral policies based on maximizing the outcomes for the different state actors who will attribute the short term costs to long term benefits. Although the rational choice model is considered as simple and cannot easily explain the complex multilateral system, it was one of the theoretical approaches that many theorists proposed for multilateral policies and decision making processes (Bouchard, Peterson, & Tocci, 2013). Another dominant perspective in multilateralism is based on economic analysis and especially the transaction cost which plays major role in shaping multilateral policies (Cox, 2016). Although these factors may be perceived differently by different state actors based on their preferences and power relationships, it is relatively common that each state actor within the multilateral regime aims to minimize transaction cost, minimize risk and uncertainty while achieving best outcomes. For instance, stronger states will benefit from weaker states position in the multilateral institutions, while weaker states will free ride and benefit also from the legitimacy of multilateral institutions decision making (Burley, 1993).

This theory is analogous to realism, neo-realism and game theory in international relation theory at which states are "conscious goal-seeking agents" pursuing their interest in an environment that is characterized by anarchy (Caporaso, 1993, p. 605). Based on this notion, these state's interests are independently given and conflict with each other, the game theory model explains that the "repetition of the game" an infinite number of times will bring the incentives to cooperation so that the actors can benefit on the long run (Caporaso, 1993, p. 609). State involvement in trade multilateral policies, state enters into trade agreements trying to achieve a position in the international trade without any discrimination. Another example is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), states for security reasons will participate into the multilateral agreements to obtain a collective security and protection. Policy process is influenced by individual different states interests, capabilities and strategies. The final outcome must benefit individual actors under the multilateral relations (Cox, 2016; Rey, & Vergé, 2016).

Kevin Nazirny (2003) in his article "Rational Idealism: The Political Economy of Internationalism in the United States and Great Britain, 1870-1945" followed similar approach while explaining the early emergence of internationalism. He explained the theoretical perspective of the emergence of multilateral institutions by the "Commercial Peace Theory" which as a branch of the liberal international relations theory. Multilateral institutions are an instrument for sustaining world order. Policy outcomes will maintain state actors trade and investments relations and tend to sustain peaceful, law-governed relations (Rey, & Vergé, 2016). The multilateral policies will seek collaboration with the different states under the same multilateral agreement to encourage the economic activities for the different state (Nazirny, 2003).

Multilateral organizations are considered as projects initiated by democratic states based on the notion that solving any political disagreement should not be through violence but through elections and the courts. Therefore, democratic nations, such as the United States as a state with strong civic institutions and universal ideals, will support this form of cooperation that use "public opinion and legal mechanisms to resolve international disputes", while other states will consider multilateral treaties only in the case if such treaties will eliminate opportunism, create effective rule enforcement, exclude free riders and solve collective action problems (Desai, 2013; Nazirny, 2003 p. 3). Multilateral bodies are "policy prescriptions, including the strengthening of international law, the creation of regimes, and the use of multilateral diplomacy, are intended to facilitate non-coercive bargaining" (Nazirny, 2003 p. 8). Powerful states will establish international systems to persuade other states to recognize its powerful position. The multilateral treaty becomes an instrument to reshape and govern the international system in accordance with hegemony strategic interests. Fortman, MacFarlane, and Rousset (1997) found that there are two general theoretical perspectives for multilateralism: the realist-rational

choice and the social-constructivist, liberal-institutionalist, or post-modernist. Based on the realist-rational choice perspective, multilateral institutions are “marginal phenomena” operating within a bargaining system based on member states own power and interest (Fortman, MacFarlane, and Roussel, 1997, p. 4). Multilateral institutions are policy instruments and tool of their member states that either “used, abused or ignored”, therefore these institutions are “anonymous bureaucracies” promote cooperation in a very limited sense when it meets the state short term interest, member states will free ride and cheat when they have collective responsibilities (Fortman, MacFarlane, and Roussel, 1997, p. 4). This perception of multilateral organization was only perceived by few authors and can be referred to the different forms of these organizations and its policies.

Lisa I. Martin (1993) in her work “The Rational State Choice of Multilateralism” agrees on the belief that multilateralism emerged after World War II, but she categorized the multilateral organizations as either issues specific organizations or general purpose organizations. Multilateral organizations will have no privileged decision making states but all decision making process will be on a multilateral bases. She referred to multilateral institutions with three principles of “indivisibility, generalized organizing principles, and diffuse reciprocity” (Martin, 1993, p.91). Martin argued that multilateral institution is a tool and mean rather than a goal. This may explain the position at which some theorists may criticize multilateral activities. According to Martin, states are self- interested, utility maximizers and will turn into multilateralism to obtain security, international trade liberalization, and economic growth (Martin, 1993).

These different views on multilateral organizations and its policy were discussed further in international relation theory. They viewed the world as a global market and believed in the role of these organizations in coordinating the relations between the different actors. In the following section, multilateralism and political economy will be discussed with an emphasis on the role of multilateral policies in regulating the world economy.

### **Multilateralism and Political Economy**

Political economy is the field that focuses on analyzing and understanding the state behavior and the interaction between the political and the economic (Sunkel, & Inotai, 2016). This field envisions the exchange of the influence of the different multilateral policies in the global economy and the implications of the state actors’ policies on international trade and investment, multinational businesses and international markets. Many theorists believe that multilateral policies are influenced by the work of many economists such as John Maynard Keynes in 1920 (Wilkinson, 2002). On the national level, public policies are very critical in capitalist democracies. In the post-World War II era, welfare capitalist democracies economy became very crucial and vital for the state. Many scholars discussed the welfare capitalist states’ policies and analyzed the development of the public policies in these regimes. Since the early emergence of multilateralism in the beginning of this century during the Paris Peace Accord in the post First World War era, John Maynard Keynes proposed the establishment of a Free Trade Union to operate under the League of Nations (Wilkinson, 2002).

Governments have the main role in sustaining the economy through fighting stagnation, inflation and unemployment (Gill, 2016). Investment and employment for instance is highly influenced by the market conditions and will have direct impacts on the public. Government policies will protect household income through some specific labor market policies, while social policies in the welfare state will have major role in influencing the labor market and controlling the labor supply and demand through different policies such as the early retirement programs and pension policies (Abdelal, Blyth, & Parsons, 2015). In his work “The Changing Governance of Welfare: Recent Trends in its Primary Functions, Scale, and Modes of Coordination”, Bob Jessop focused on the effectiveness of the social and economic policies that emerged in what he referred to as “advanced western capitalist welfare states in the postwar Atlantic Fordist boom” (Jessop, 1999, p. 348). He argued that the international markets had real impact on the influence and the effectiveness of the economic and social policies in the welfare states after World War II. Although these policies aimed at stimulating the economy for capital accumulation, the role of these policies was undermined by internationalization of the economy and especially among the advanced capitalist economies (Jessop, 1998).

Multilateral organizations became tool to organize the world economy through its different economic, trade and investments policies. Rorden Wilkinson (2002) in his book, *Multilateralism and World Trade Organization: The Architecture and Extension of International Trade Regulation*, discussed multilateralism as a form of governance and political process that stretch back to the war time negotiations. He emphasized that the political leaders sought to create “organizations, institutions, specialized agencies and private bodies ...for the management of political, economic and social affairs” (Wilkinson, 2002, p.3). Rodren explores multilateralism and its role in international political economy by analyzing the development of multilateralism after World War II. He emphasized the importance of multilateral institutions that were established in the post world war era to administer the international economy. States established multilateral regimes designed to “govern large tracts of global social, economic, political and cultural life” (Wilkinson, 2002, p.12). Since the 1920 the political economy took multilateral form when different policies were formulated to mitigate the different economic challenges that faced the European states. Politician used Keynes ideas to formulate economic governance on the

international level, but these ideas for multilateral organizations to govern the international economy did not bear fruit initially until Churchill and Roosevelt convened the Atlantic Conference and laid the foundation for the postwar economic order (Wilkinson, 2002). Multilateral organizations were established with a political will to regulate the international economy.

The international system is a market place with different state actors and multilateral policies regulate this market place so national economies can benefit (Abdelal, Blyth, & Parsons, 2015; Cohn, 2015; McGinnis, 2000). John McGinnis argued that multilateralism is a “constitutive mechanism” that can only be justified if it improves the “well-being of the participatory nations” (McGinnis, 2000, p. 382). In his article “The Political Economy of Global Multilateralism”, the author analyzed “Global Multilateralism” based on the assumption that humans in nature live in groups with two main instincts of exchanging goods and services in return for other goods and services, and hierarchy by which individuals gain goods and services based on their position and status in the social order, exchange is the mode of acquiring the resources and therefore wealth increase as a result of the exchange (McGinnis, 2000). Individuals will continue the exchange process based on hierarchy but each individual will have a fear from other individual to take his position. Thus governments for an economic reasons in a multilateral structure wanted to promote exchange while constrain hierarchy (McGinnis, 2000). The goal of multilateral policies is to expand the market across national boundaries. Multilateral policies will provide opportunities for large competitive economic markets either by correcting market failures or extending markets (McGinnis, 2000). Additionally, multilateral policies provide different mechanisms that will contribute to sustaining national markets through different tariff and trade policies such as international property rights. Therefore, the role of multilateral policies is crucial to the world economy. The multilateral regimes play major role in regulating the global market. But the policy making process may face some external forces from non-state actors that may influence these policies (Abdelal, Blyth, & Parsons, 2015; Cohn, 2015). In the following section, pluralistic multilateralism is discussed to understand the role of different actors other than the states in shaping multilateral policies.

### **Pluralistic Multilateralism**

The pluralistic approach to multilateralism had discussed by Wilkinson (2002) in his work with Hughes (2000) arguing that multilateral organizations developed “communicative linkages” with non-governmental organizations as an interpretation for the involvement of the civil society in the policy making process. Trade unions and other civil society organizations were able to make changes to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to take account of workers’ rights and made real changes to Havana Charter. The World Trade Organization also adopted general policies to build links with different grassroots and civil society organizations (Wilkinson, 2002). Sirku K. Hellsten (2006) in his work “Multilateralism and Economic Justice” proposed a new definition which he referred to “plurilateralism” discussing the increasing power of global civil society that lead to increasing “plurilateralization” of world politics. He argued that plurilateralism referred to the different levels of the social interactions where different actors have the power to influence the global governance. Social movements and NGO’s play major role in unification and transferring ideas and actions while spreading information and knowledge through different forums to get their voice heard. Through what he referred to state-based treaties and lobby, plurilateral structure will influence decision making in multilateral politics (Hellsten, 2006).

Sikkink (1993) in his work ‘Human rights, principled issue-networks, and sovereignty in Latin America’ raised the issue of the influence of the civil society organizations and their impact on the international human rights policies in Latin America. He used a case study in Argentina and Mexico in the 1970s and 1980s. In his article, he explored the emergence and the nature of these groups and under which conditions these groups can contribute to changing both state understandings about sovereignty and state human rights practices through a comparative study of international human rights pressures on Argentina and Mexico, he concluded that these groups differ from other forms of transnational relations and their main strength is that they are driven by shared values and principled ideas (Sikkink, 1993). This theoretical approach to multilateralism does not explain the role of multilateral organization and its interaction with these outside actors. Although it was discussed by different authors, it can be viewed as interpretation for some multilateral activities without explaining the mechanisms of these groups and their interaction with the multilateral organization. Some theorists clearly express their dissatisfaction with both the rational choice and the pluralist approach to multilateralism. The multilateral organization and its influence on different state actors is discussed in depth by the institutionalists. The position of the institutionalists can better explain the multilateral policies and states behavior. In the following section, the institutional approach to multilateralism is discussed.

### **Institutional Route to Multilateralism**

Institutional theory plays major role in explaining the policy process. Although the institutional approach was recently discovered, it has major contribution to explain the policy process. The emergence of the institutional

approach has emerged when theorists began considering the role of the state as an already established institution in influencing the policy making process contrary to other approaches such as classical Marxist which viewed state as “supporting player” (Hill, 2005, p.78). March and Olson in their work “Institutional Perspectives on Political Institutions” examined the different political institutions and processes from legal systems, political parties, legislatures and media. They analyzed the rules and the practices in the political institutions and how these rules and practices are converted into political behavior (Hill, 2005).

Hall and Taylor work “Political Science and the Three New Institutionalism” also aimed to explain the role of the institution in the policy process. Hall and Taylor work re-constructs the new institutional theory in three different “analytical approaches” (Hall and Taylor, 1996, p.937), which they referred to as schools of thoughts. In their work they focused on representing three approaches of new institutionalism emphasizing the main two fundamental issues to any institutional analysis which are the role of institutions in shaping the individual behavior and how institution originates and its changing processes.

Hall and Taylor used the work of different authors such Robert O. Kohane (1994) and Lisa L. Martin (1992), and referred to those authors as rational choice institutionalists. In their work, Hall and Taylor used what they referred to “cross-national” coalition and “international regimes” behavior to demonstrate and explain some of the core concepts of the rational choice institutionalism (Hall and Taylor, 1996, p.944).

### Conclusion

The basic conclusion of this research paper is that multilateralism has not been discussed thoroughly by policy analysts and international relations theorists. Part of this shortage in discussing multilateralism may be referred to the relatively new emergence or to the new role of these organizations in the international system. Another explanation may refer to the believe that this organizational form does not have real influence on the international system and it is a tool for powerful states to achieve its own interests. Apart from the neglect of multilateralism in the realm policy theory, throughout the paper, four main theoretical frameworks for multilateralism were introduced. The rational choice and hegemonic-stability theory which focused on the state actors’ instrumental behavior, the political economy, which focused on the role of these organizations’ policies in the regulating the global economy, the pluralists approach, which focused on the role of the interest groups and external bodies in influencing the multilateral policy outcomes, and finally the institutionalist approach with its two school of thoughts: the rational choice and the sociologist approaches. Both the rational choice and the pluralist approaches have many limitations in explaining the multilateral institutions. These limitations can be summarized by neglecting the role of the institution in shaping the policy outcomes and influencing the actors’ behavior.

Although the political economy theoretical framework successfully explains some of the multilateral policies in some multilateral regimes such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), it may not justify some multilateral policies in the realm of, security, development, and human rights. The institutional approach examined the different aspects of multilateralism and particularly the sociality of the states in these organizations. Sociological institutionalism also explained the state behavior and identified the role of the institution in shaping the social identity of these institutions. Additionally, the institutional approach was inclusive in explaining the Western identity of these organizations and the cultural approach to the actors’ behavior. Therefore, this approach to multilateralism policies may be more coherence and better explain the multilateral policies.

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