

Editorial

## Publics in Global Politics: A Framing Paper

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Submitted: 19 July 2023 | Published: 31 August 2023

### Abstract

In IR and beyond, there is considerable debate about the ways global governance, the transnationalisation of publics, and changes in communication technologies have affected the interplay between publics and global politics. This debate is characterised by disagreements about how to conceptualise publics in the global realm—and whether or not they exist in the first place. We seek to contribute to this debate by disentangling the various meanings associated with publics in order to get a better grasp of how publics shape and are shaped by global politics. We do so in two steps. First, we distinguish four different manifestations of publics: audiences, spheres, institutions, and public interests. Second, we identify four key dynamics that affect the evolution and interplay of these manifestations in global politics: the distinction between public and private, changes in communications technologies, the politics of transparency, and the need to legitimise global governance. These interrelated dynamics reshape the publicness of global politics while sustaining the plurality of the publics that partake in it.

### Keywords

common goods; communication technologies; global governance; global politics; institutions; public-private divide; publics; transparency

### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Publics in Global Politics” edited by Janne Mende (Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law) and Thomas Müller (Bielefeld University).

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### 1. Introduction

Publics are key to our understanding of politics. In fact, the two are closely interrelated, as the common understanding of politics as the organisation and regulation of public affairs demonstrates (e.g., Leftwich, 2004). In this thematic issue, we focus on how publics shape and are shaped by global politics, understood here as political interactions among various kinds of actors across national borders.

Both global politics and the publics that partake in it have changed considerably in the past decades. Today, global governance is characterised by a complex and constantly evolving constellation of actors—among them states, international organisations, non-governmental organisations, and firms—that perform governance tasks and assume governance authority (Avant et al.,

2010; Stone, 2020; Zürn, 2018). Simultaneously, publics have also become more transnational, though national or sub-national publics have not disappeared. This transnationalisation is part of broader processes of change—including digitalisation and the establishment of a global communicative space with the internet—that have profoundly transformed the characteristics of publics in the global realm (Baum & Potter, 2019; Fraser, 2007; Nash, 2014; Seeliger & Seignani, 2021; Volkmer, 2014).

The rich literature on publics in global politics, by and large, agrees that global governance and the transformation of publics have altered the relationship between publics and global politics, but differs on *how much* and *in what ways* they have altered it. One crucial reason for this disagreement is the absence of a consensual definition of publics in the global realm. Instead, the

debate is characterised by a variety of conceptualisations of publics.

Against this background, rather than asking whether a global public exists (Ruggie, 2004), potentially exists (Zürn, 2021), or does not exist (Eriksen & Sending, 2013), this thematic issue studies what forms of publics exist in the global realm and how they overlap and interact. We do not focus solely on global publics—in the sense of worldwide publics—but more broadly investigate the various manifestations of publics that exist in and co-evolve with global politics.

In this Editorial, we develop a conceptual framework for this endeavour and discuss how the 11 articles in the thematic issue use it to study the interplay between publics and global politics. First, we distinguish four manifestations of publics, each based on a different notion of publicness. Second, we identify four key dynamics that affect and partly stem from the interplay between these publics and global politics. Third, we reflect on how these dynamics (re)shape the interplay of publics and global politics.

## 2. Four Manifestations

IR scholars tend to focus on political publics (Eriksen & Sending, 2013; Mitzen, 2005; Sending, 2016; Steffek, 2015; Stone, 2020). They are interested in publics that are involved in the governance of issues deemed to be the common affair of a group of actors and dealt with, directly or indirectly, through collective arrangements. But not all publics are political (e.g., Huber & Osterhammel, 2020, pp. 15–16). To disentangle the relationship between publics and politics, we distinguish four manifestations of publics: audiences, spheres, institutions, and interests. Empirically, these manifestations may overlap and co-constitute each other, but analytically differentiating them provides a clearer grasp of the plurality of forms of publics in global politics. We contend that in and through their interaction, these four manifestations impart global politics with publicness. However, not all of them need to play a part in the production of publicness in global politics.

The first manifestation of publics is *audiences*. These are groups of actors that share a common focus (Huber & Osterhammel, 2020, pp. 16–17; Warner, 2002, pp. 60–61). An audience in a theatre is one example, but the group of actors does not have to be in one place. The key characteristic is not co-presence but co-orientation. Actors form part of publics as audiences when they pay attention to the same phenomenon, be it certain events (e.g., a G20 summit or a war) or certain issues (e.g., climate change). The focus of attention can be political—that is, a matter regarded by the group, or parts of it, as in need of collective organisation and regulation—or non-political. Thus, the relationship between publics as audiences and global politics is a variable one: Some audiences focus on aspects of global politics while others do not. Moreover, audiences are often

composed of diverse actors. In their contribution, Aue and Börgel (2023) discuss how the varied membership of digital publics can be mapped, using the UN's Twitter-sphere as an example.

The second manifestation refers to *public spheres*. In this manifestation, publics are considered groups of actors that form communicative spaces by engaging in debates over events and issues. A public is then a “social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse” (Warner, 2002, p. 62). Put differently: what ties the group of actors together is that its members react and refer to each other's arguments about an issue, thus creating and sustaining a joint discourse. Such a public is a “space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself” (Warner, 2002, p. 50). It does not necessarily coalesce around pre-existing issues, as these issues may also be the product of the discourse within the group of actors. Just like publics as audiences, public spheres can have weaker or stronger connections to politics. For example, sectoral publics, such as the academic public or the arts public, may be part of and differentiated from political publics (Zürn, 2021, p. 162). Political publics are discursive spheres in which the governance of common affairs is debated and the related decisions are legitimised and contested. In his contribution, Herborth (2023) elucidates the political character of public spheres by depicting them as sites of social struggles. Part of these struggles is the regulation of the discourse, as Schlag's (2023) analysis of the EU's politics of regulating a public sphere in the digital realm demonstrates.

The third manifestation of publics are *institutions*. Institutions are regarded as public when they are set up by a group of actors to coordinate and regulate common affairs and/or to produce common goods. These institutions are authorised by the group of actors to act in their name. The publicness of the institutions is thus based on claims of representation. Their key characteristic is neither co-orientation nor a joint discourse, but rather a joint institutional framework. The concept of publics as institutions emphasises the organisational arrangement(s) through which groups of actors develop and perform collective agency. From this perspective, a public is a “*collective entity of self-determination and decision-making*” (Eriksen & Sending, 2013, p. 219; italics as in the original). This understanding informs discussions of global publics that emphasise the accountability of governors to the public affected by their decisions and the capacity of the governors to effectively implement these decisions (Eriksen & Sending, 2013, pp. 219–220; see also Fraser, 2007, pp. 20–23). The manifestation of publics as institutions is—in contrast to the first and second manifestations—inextricably interlinked with politics as it relates to how a group of actors constructs, organises, and regulates its common affairs. This is not to say that all public institutions are always perceived to be political. Public institutions such as broadcasting or health services may well be regarded as non-political as long as there are no controversies over their governance.

In his contribution, Vinken (2023) highlights the pivotal role of international law in the institutionalisation of publics in the realm of climate governance.

Finally, the fourth manifestation revolves around *public interests* (in the normative and dynamic sense of the term). In this broader sense, it is also labelled—often synonymously—as general interests, public good, common good, or general welfare. Actors postulate public interests when they denote common aims that a group of actors (supposedly) share. They thus do not only construct a group of actors—even if this group is only imagined—but also make the interest or well-being of said group a normative reference point for politics. This makes definitions of public interests a genuinely political matter. Empirically, public interests often play a key part in the production of publicness in global politics, particularly in the legitimisation of publics as institutions. Koppell (2010, p. 52), for instance, suggests “see[ing] ‘publicness’ as a measure of the extent to which an organization draws on, invokes, or affects the common interests of all members of a society.” Still, definitions of public interests are highly diverse, ranging from additive definitions as mere aggregates of individual interests to normatively laden definitions emphasising superior moral reasoning, complemented by deliberative concepts that interweave public with individual interests via free and equal discourse in a public sphere of deliberation (Mansbridge, 1990). Mende (2023b) unpacks these different meanings to study public interests as a legitimisation tool for global governors.

Table 1 summarises these four manifestations of publics, their key characteristics, and their different relation with politics. Differentiating the four manifestations opens up two analytical avenues: firstly, a more fine-grained discussion of which manifestations of publics exist in global politics, or distinct policy fields within it, and, secondly, the study of when and how some, or all, of these manifestations co-exist and interact. To give two examples: public spheres are usually understood as intermediates between societies and political systems or as checks on what public institutions—whether national or international—do (Eriksen & Sending, 2013; Fraser, 1990; Habermas, 1992; Zürn, 2021). Governors, in turn,

mobilise arguments about public interests within public spheres to legitimise their activities vis-à-vis audiences. Hence, all four manifestations of publics may become relevant, as McLarren (2023) shows in her study of religious publics in the context of the Ukraine war.

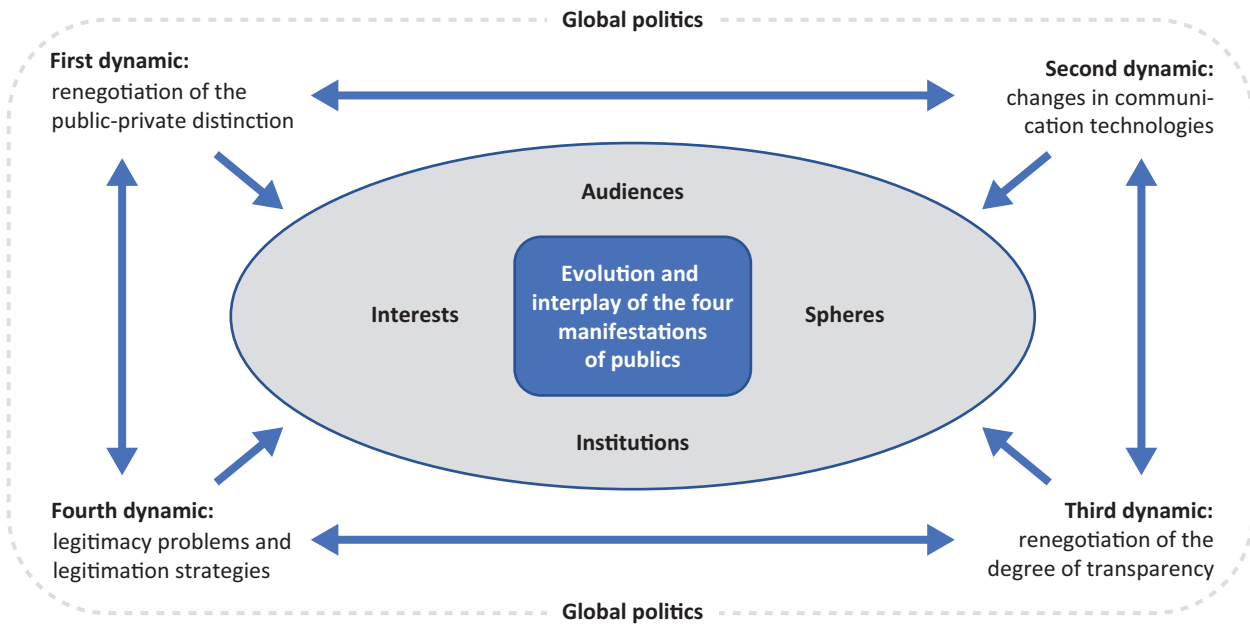
### 3. Four Dynamics

Global politics is shaped and reshaped by various dynamics. Four of them are particularly relevant for how the four manifestations impart global politics with publicness. These are dynamics relating to the distinction between public and private, changes in communication technologies, questions of transparency, and the legitimisation of global governors. In this section, we briefly discuss each of these four dynamics, which are inherently political as they affect not only the presence, evolution, and interplay of the four manifestations of publics, but through them also shape how global politics is organised and practised. That said, the very definition of what is—or is not—part of global politics is decided within global politics itself. The effects of the dynamics are not predetermined and subject to change, which gives rise to variations in the forms of publics and publicness that shape global politics (cf. Figure 1).

The first dynamic stems from the fact that all manifestations of publics are defined by their distinction from what is regarded as private. This profoundly affects what counts as “political” in global politics. Notions of “the private” usually refer to what is excluded from publicness, thereby also defining what is included. However, the distinction between public and private is not as dichotomous as it sometimes appears. Rather, while distinctive, the two mutually co-constitute and entail each other (Müller, 2020). The famous feminist slogan that the private is political illuminates how the public sphere as a place of politics is enabled by reproductive work in the private sphere (traditionally assumed by women), and how (vice-versa) public regulation—e.g., via domestic laws on child care, divorce, and women’s rights—constitutes and shapes family life, gender relations, and power inequalities at the very heart of what is understood as the private sphere (Mende, 2023a). The mutual

**Table 1.** Four manifestations of publics.

	Manifestation of publics	Key characteristic: a group of actors that:	Intertwinement with politics
1	Audiences	Share a common attention focus	Varying: Focus may or may not be on political issues/events
2	Spheres	Engage in a joint discourse about an issue/event	Varying: Discourse may or may not be about political issues/events
3	Institutions	Have a joint institutional framework	Strongly intertwined: Framework geared towards governance of common affairs
4	Interests	(Supposedly) share common aims	Strongly intertwined: Aims serve as legitimisation and guide for governance and politics



**Figure 1.** The dynamics shaping the evolution and interplay of the four manifestations of publics.

constitution of public and private is also visible in the strong interconnections between public interests and private interests. “[P]ublic and private interests cannot be fully understood if they are conceived as separate” (Mahoney et al., 2009, p. 1034), because the definition of each affects its counterpart. Public interests in global politics are thus also informed by the ways they regard or disregard private interests and whether they take the mutual constitution of the public and private into account, which is a precondition for addressing issues of power and inequalities in what is considered to be the private sphere. Focusing on cybersecurity, Liebetrau and Monsees (2023) analyse how private companies, by positioning themselves as managers of public interests, construct issue-specific publics and thereby also enhance their own authority.

The second dynamic stems from changes in communication technologies, as all four manifestations of publics are enabled and shaped by such technologies. Publics usually are dispersed rather than co-present at the same location. Such dispersed publics can only engage in a common debate when they have the technologies to communicate with each other. Publics—to put it differently—depend on communication technologies and the communicative spaces that these technologies create and sustain (Huber & Osterhammel, 2020, pp. 30–38). This is why changes in communication technologies have a profound potential to transform the publics. The telegraph, for instance, enabled new forms of more global publics in the late 19th century (Wenzlhuemer, 2013). The rise of the internet and social media today underpin and, to a considerable degree, drive current transformations of publics (Baum & Potter, 2019; Schneiker, 2021). That said, the digital revolution seems to matter in different ways for differ-

ent forms of publics. The internet, for instance, fosters global audiences but not necessarily global public institutions. Moreover, while current communication technologies potentially facilitate a global public sphere engaging in a shared debate, the global level is still marked by a plurality of languages and stark inequalities in access to communication. The technological changes make not only possible new modes of more personalised communication for international organisations, as Ecker-Ehrhardt (2023) shows in his contribution, but they also give rise to new governance issues, such as cybersecurity (see Liebetrau & Monsees, 2023).

The third dynamic relates to the level of transparency, that is, the availability of information about the issues around which publics are organised. Transparency—so the classic argument goes—fosters accountability (McCarthy & Fluck, 2017, pp. 421–422). Constituents can only hold those governing them accountable when they know what the governors are doing. Transparency is thus a crucial component of the third manifestation of publics outlined above (i.e., groups of actors that share a joint institutional framework for governing common affairs), although it matters for the other manifestations as well. As critical transparency studies emphasise, transparency “is no simple matter of opening up and sharing information, but rather a matter of managing visibilities” (Flyverbom, 2019, p. 3). The politics of transparency unfold through battles over which issues—and which aspects of them—are publicly visible and which are not. These battles can take place between states and their citizens—e.g., the right to privacy—but also among states. For instance, the degree of transparency is a key point of contention in the field of armaments and disarmament (Müller, 2021). The digital transformation is adding new dynamics to the politics of

transparency. It raises novel questions about data sharing and protection, but it also provides actors that seek to make certain activities or issues more visible with new tools (Zegart, 2022, pp. 225–250). In his contribution, Müller (2023) zooms in on one such tool, namely commercial satellite imagery, and discusses how it changes the power dynamics between state and non-state actors in the politics of transparency. Global performance indicators are another prominent tool (Kelley & Simmons, 2019). Ringel (2023) teases out the Janus face of the publicity of these indicators which put public pressure not only on the actors that they evaluate but also on those who produce them.

The fourth dynamic captures the legitimising function of publics for global politics. Notably, although Eriksen and Sending (2013, p. 230) deny the existence of a global public (in the sense of our third manifestation), they concede its salience as a construct, because “policies are justified with reference to the idea of such a public.” This is visible in two trends, relating to global governance institutions and private governance actors respectively. As they face increasing contestation (Kelley & Simmons, 2021; Zürn, 2018), global governance institutions are in growing need of legitimisation. Claims to promote public interests or to address the demands of the global publics play a crucial role in their legitimisation strategies (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Private governance actors too increasingly refer to public interests to legitimise their governance power. While this does not make them public actors, it clearly transcends the boundaries of their private roles in global governance (Mende, 2023a). That said, public and private actors also interact. In her contribution, Bajenova (2023) highlights how think tanks form part of and contribute to the legitimisation strategy of the EU. In all these cases, publicness becomes central to the politics of legitimation, affecting how global politics unfolds, and, at the same time, contributing to the constitution of audiences, spheres, institutions, and/or interests as public(s).

#### 4. Conclusion

To sum up, we propose differentiating between four manifestations of publics—audiences, spheres, institutions, and interests—to study how publics shape and are shaped by global politics. This typology helps to untangle the relationship between publics and politics. It highlights that this relation is variable with regard to the first two manifestations (audiences and spheres), while the other two manifestations (institutions and interests) are inherently political in that they stand for, respectively, the capacity of groups of actors to organise themselves and the supposedly common aims that guide their governance. By asking which manifestations of publics exist in global politics, we thus open up analytical space for studying how audiences and spheres become politicised—that is, turn from non-political into political publics—and how claims of representation and

appeals to public interests enable and constrain the work of global governors (Mende, 2023b) as well as actors producing public knowledge (Ringel, 2023). In addition, the contributions to this thematic issue underscore the interplay between publics and global politics, highlighting that they co-construct each other and the crucial role of politics in defining what is or should be public (Müller, 2023) or what should or should not happen in publics (Schlag, 2023).

Furthermore, the contributions shed light on how different dynamics in global politics affect the evolution of publics and their relation to global politics. They show that the dynamics do not give rise to one global public but rather sustain a plurality of publics. Media systems remain fragmented, pushing governance institutions to rely on other strategies to foster public spheres and legitimise themselves (Bajenova, 2023). Social media has enabled diverse actors to interact with international organisations (Aue & Börgel, 2023), and the latter to interact more directly with their constituencies (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2023). But social media publics are nonetheless only one part of the public spheres that observe, debate, and contest global governance. Publics continue to coalesce around claims and activities relating to the governance of specific issues (Liebetrau & Monsees, 2023; Vinken, 2023) or—as in the case of religious publics—around specific world views (McLarren, 2023). In order to diffuse public pressures, states continue to fragment public debates (Müller, 2023). Last but not least, public spheres are both sites of deliberation and struggle and, as such, involve the formation of counterpublics that challenge the discourses in established publics (Herborth, 2023). A plurality of publics is thus likely to remain, but the dynamics, nonetheless, make these publics more and more integral parts of global politics.

#### Acknowledgments

Our work on this Editorial has greatly benefitted from the discussions and feedback at the annual conference of the working group Sociology in International Relations of the German Political Science Association in November 2021 and the authors’ workshop for the thematic issue in December 2022. We are grateful to Ulrich Franke and Jasmin Siri for co-organising the annual conference together with us.

#### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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