Democracy in Global Governance: The Promises and Pitfalls of Transnational Actors
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The participation of transnational actors in global policymaking is increasingly seen as a means to democratize global governance. Drawing on alternative theories of democracy and existing empirical evidence, we assess the promises and pitfalls of this vision. We explore how the structuring and operation of international institutions, public-private partnerships, and transnational actors themselves may facilitate expanded participation and enhanced accountability in global governance. We find considerable support for an optimistic verdict on the democratizing potential of transnational actor involvement, but also identify hurdles in democratic theory and the practice of global governance that motivate a more cautious outlook. In conclusion, we call for research that explores the conditions for democracy in global governance through a combination of normative political theory and positive empirical research. Keywords: global governance, democracy, transnational actors, accountability, participation.

THE GROWTH OF GOVERNANCE BEYOND THE NATION-STATE IS ONE OF THE most distinct political developments of the past half-century. Whereas the early postwar period witnessed the establishment of a set of major international institutions, more recent developments include the emergence and spread of public-private partnerships, as well as entirely private governance arrangements. Traditionally, the rationale of global governance arrangements, and their principal source of legitimacy, has been their capacity to address problems and generate benefits for states and societies. Yet, in recent years, international institutions and other governance arrangements have increasingly been challenged on normative grounds—and have been found to suffer from democratic deficits.¹

The purpose of this article is to address the potential role of transnational actors in the process of democratizing global governance. We use this term to denote the broad range of private actors that organize and operate across state borders, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), advocacy networks, social movements, party associations, philanthropic foundations, and transnational corporations (TNCs).² Of particular interest are global civil so-
ciety actors, whose participation in policymaking increasingly is seen as holding the promise of a democratization of global governance.\(^3\) Transferring models of democracy originally developed for the national context, and developing new models of democracy tailored for the international level, democracy theorists have advanced blueprints for how global governance arrangements may be reformed to integrate transnational actors and thus meet the standards of democratic decisionmaking.

In this article, we assess the promises and pitfalls of this vision, drawing on diverse strands of theoretical and empirical research. Departing from theories of representative, participatory, and deliberative democracy, we identify how the involvement of transnational actors may serve to democratize global governance, by way of expanding participation and strengthening accountability. But, in addition, we address the problems and limits of this vision—in principle and as revealed by existing evidence. We structure this analysis in three parts, each exploring a central component of global governance: the design of international institutions, the nature of public-private partnerships, and the qualities of participating transnational actors.

International institutions and public-private partnerships have been selected because they constitute two prominent institutional forms in global governance—one traditional and established, one recent and increasingly common, both frequently criticized on democratic grounds. In relation to these institutional forms, we discuss the extent to which transnational actor involvement may enhance democracy by improving accountability and participation. Yet, when analyzing the potential of transnational actors to contribute to a democratization of global governance, it is essential to examine the democratic credentials of these very actors as well. Hence, we have selected as our third theme the extent to which transnational actors themselves, in their organization and activities, live up to standards of inclusive participation and clear mechanisms of accountability.

In all three areas, we find considerable support for an optimistic verdict on the democratizing potential of greater transnational actor involvement. Most notably, bringing on board NGOs, social movements, and advocacy networks can expand participation in global governance, not only because it broadens the range of actors involved in international policymaking and the provision of public goods, but also because these actors by nature tend to allow for more direct citizen participation. In addition, transnational actor involvement can strengthen accountability in global governance by supplementing existing mechanisms of internal accountability within institutions and organizations with new mechanisms of external accountability through stakeholders and citizens.

However, we also identify a set of nonnegligible concerns and obstacles that motivate a considerably more cautious or even pessimistic outlook. The patterns of participation in international institutions, public-private partner-
The concluding message of this article is that future research on democracy and global governance would be best served by combining normative political theory and positive empirical research. What is needed are not more grandiose blueprints for global democracy or more case studies of transnational activity, but comparative empirical assessments of the conditions under which transnational actors may live up to the promises and avoid the pitfalls as forces for democratic global governance.

The presentation proceeds in five parts. The next section briefly introduces the three models of democracy that privilege alternative mechanisms for the realization of democracy. The subsequent three sections offer analyses of the extent to which international institutions, public-private partnerships, and transnational actors themselves are structured and operate in ways that facilitate participation and accountability in global governance. We conclude by outlining an agenda for future research on transnational actors and the conditions for democracy in global governance.

Models of Democracy and Key Democratic Values
In order to analyze the democratic promises and pitfalls of transnational actor participation, we need criteria that are well anchored in established theories and conceptions of democracy. Yet normative democratic theory is not a unified approach but consists of several different strands of theory, often described as alternative models of democracy. One common distinction in the literature is the trichotomy of representative democracy, participatory democracy, and deliberative democracy.4 We very briefly outline the main characteristics of these three models and highlight the varying emphasis in these models on participation and accountability as central democratic values.

The model of **representative democracy** emphasizes the opportunity for citizens to choose between competing political elites with alternative political agendas, and to hold decisionmakers accountable for their actions.5 The electoral contest is the central mechanism through which citizens make political choices and hold their leaders accountable. When applied to the international level, the model of representative democracy translates into calls for the establishment of majoritarian institutions based on electoral contest, as well as the strengthening of transnational party associations.

The model of **participatory democracy** stresses direct citizen participation as a prerequisite for a proper democracy.6 According to the ideals of this model, it is highly unsatisfactory if citizens are reduced to being only voters...
whereas political elites control actual decisionmaking. Instead, citizens must be brought back into the political process itself. Compared to those favoring representative democracy, participatory democrats also tend to be more concerned about avoiding exclusion and marginalization based on, for instance, gender, ethnicity, and class. This results in a focus on power structures, as well as institutional mechanisms of direct democracy. When developed in the context of global governance, this perspective translates into proposals for transnational referenda, citizen initiatives, judicial access for individuals, and broad civil society participation, including previously marginalized groups.7

The model of deliberative democracy emphasizes deliberation among citizens or their representatives as the mode for realizing democracy.8 Criticizing other theories of democracy for paying too much attention to the aggregation of preferences, proponents of this model argue that democratically legitimate decisions best are achieved through an informed public debate. Via the joint exploration of arguments and alternatives, deliberation leads to the formation of opinions, facilitates consensus, and lends legitimacy to decisions. Prerequisites for successful deliberation include access to reliable and relevant information as well as the existence of a public sphere with open forums of discussion. When applied to the international realm, this model generates proposals for stakeholder forums, transparency, and transnational discursive space.9

Although these three models were originally formulated for democracy in national polities, scholars have in recent years sought to theorize democracy specifically at the global level. In this vein, cosmopolitan democratic theory is informed by the ambition to rethink how democracy can be organized given the special character of the global arena.10 Whereas many concrete proposals for democracy at the global level are inspired by traditional forms of democracy, the purpose is to move beyond models of national democracy. Central aspects of the cosmopolitan vision are the construction of new democratic institutions at the global level, broad civil society participation in decision-making, and redistribution of power at regional and global levels along the lines of the all-affected principle. Nevertheless, cosmopolitan models draw on representative, participatory, and to some extent also deliberative models of democracy, and hence we do not treat cosmopolitan democracy as a separate model of democracy here.

Whereas this brief outline of models of democracy provides our study with a necessary base in normative democratic theory, it does not offer more specific criteria that can be used to structure the analysis. For this purpose we need to focus on key democratic values. There are a number of candidates, like equality, freedom, participation, and accountability. A comprehensive treatment of a large set of democratic values would be beyond the scope of this article. For our purposes, the concepts of participation and accountability are most useful. We have two reasons for this selection. First, these values appear as recurrent con-
cerns in much democratic theory. Applying these concepts, we do not privilege one model of democracy over others. Second, these are arguably the most important concepts in contemporary writings about democracy beyond the nation-state and hence central aspects of the vision of transnational actors as democratizing forces in global governance that we examine.

From the perspectives of participatory and deliberative democracy, the scope and form of participation in deliberation, decisionmaking, or other political activities are the key concerns. Generally speaking, the more inclusive the deliberation or decisionmaking, the more democratic it is. The ideal is that all significantly affected people should have equal possibility to participate. In form, participation could be limited to the election of representatives, as favored by proponents of representative democracy, or involve more direct and active participation, as advocated by participatory democrats.

The model of representative democracy stresses formal accountability mechanisms rather than participation. Accountability means that "some actors have the right to hold other actors to a set of standards, to judge whether they have fulfilled their responsibilities in light of these standards, and to impose sanctions if they determine that these responsibilities have not been met." Effective accountability requires mechanisms for information and communication between decisionmakers and stakeholders, as well as mechanisms for imposing penalties. We can distinguish between external accountability to those affected by the activities of the actor exercising power, and internal accountability to the principals who have delegated authority to the power wielders. From the perspective of participatory democracy, external accountability, through the inclusion of stakeholders at the grassroots level, is the ideal.

In our examination of democratic promises and pitfalls of transnational actors in global governance, we will focus on the central democratic values of participation and accountability and relate our analysis to the models of representative, participatory, and deliberative democracy. We begin by exploring international institutions.

**Democracy, Transnational Actors, and International Institutions**

One of the most profound trends in global governance over the past fifteen years is the growing extent to which international institutions are challenged on normative grounds and found to suffer from "democratic deficits." According to the critics, the traditional source of legitimacy for international institutions—problem-solving effectiveness—is no longer sufficient in itself, but must be supplemented with more democratic procedures of decisionmaking. Formulated in the terms of Fritz Scharpf, global governance must rest on input legitimacy as well as output legitimacy.
The scholarly debate on the democratic legitimacy of international institutions today features three main positions. According to the first position, democracy beyond the nation-state will be impossible to achieve because of the absence of a transnational demos. Even if such a development may be normatively desirable, it is not realistic to imagine democratic international institutions, according to this pessimistic view. Proponents of a second position question the diagnosis of a democratic deficit in global governance, and therefore claim that there are few reasons to engage in democratizing reforms. If international institutions are compared to how established democracies actually work, rather than to ideal models of democracy, the verdict will be more positive and the need for democratizing reforms less imperative. Finally, advocates of a third position recognize the presence of a democratic deficit and consider it both desirable and possible to democratize international institutions. Scholars in this tradition suggest expanding the involvement of transnational actors in general and civil society actors in particular. The vision of transnational actors as a source of democracy in global governance is thus well represented in this third tradition, and we will discuss the viability of this position.

**Participation**

Offering transnational actors access to international institutions holds a promise of enhanced democratic legitimacy through expanded participation. In the traditional model of decisionmaking in international institutions, participation is limited to state representatives. As the constituent members of international institutions, states typically control the major decision bodies and carry the primary responsibility for implementing agreements. In democratic terms, this model rests on the principle of indirect representation of the people through the participation of nationally elected governments and their designated bureaucratic agents. Yet, when measured against the democratic ideal of inclusion of all significantly affected people, emphasized by both participatory and deliberative theories of democracy, this model is called into question. The activities of international institutions increasingly have an impact on the lives of citizens, as issues that previously were dealt with at the national level now are addressed through joint decisionmaking at the international level. Even so, the formal means for citizen participation largely remain local or national. Though citizens may participate in local and national decisionmaking, either indirectly through the election of representatives or directly through petitions and citizen initiatives, such mechanisms are typically absent at the international level, which still constitutes the domain of state officials and international bureaucrats.

Transnational actor involvement in international institutions expands the range of participation and offers a complementary channel for citizen influence. By mobilizing citizens for particular causes, civil society organizations—such as NGOs—social movements, and religious institutions give
voice to the stakeholders in global governance. Transnational actors may thus help bring citizen concerns into the debate and onto the agenda. Conversely, civil society organizations may help raise the public’s awareness of the decisions and actions of international institutions. In the words of Jens Steffek and Patrizia Nanz, “Organized civil society has the potential to function as a ‘transmission belt’ between the global citizenry and the institutions of global governance.”

Participatory democratic theory suggests that the inclusion of civil society organizations in international policymaking can help to upgrade the people from passive voters to active citizens. Whereas in a representative democracy citizen influence on global issues is reduced to the casting of a ballot in national elections, civil society activism offers a more direct and potentially more rewarding channel. In addition, transnational actor participation in international institutions can open up means of influence for groups in society that often are marginalized in representative bodies. Deliberative democratic theory, too, conceives of expanded participation as a democratic virtue and underlines the potential for arriving at legitimate decisions through an open and informed public debate.

Yet, offering access to transnational actors is not a complication-free solution to the legitimacy problems of international institutions. There are a number of potential pitfalls, of which two are particularly prominent. The first concern pertains to the question of who gets to participate. Existing research suggests that the participation of transnational actors is far from evenly balanced. Economically powerful transnational corporations tend to have more access points. Among civil society actors, well-organized and well-funded NGOs tend to be overrepresented, whereas marginalized groups from developing countries tend to be highly underrepresented. Accreditation procedures that screen and select NGOs partly on the basis of their usefulness for the international institution in question further influence patterns of participation.

A second concern pertains to how transnational actors get to participate. Formal participation by transnational actors on the decision-making bodies of international institutions remains exceedingly rare, with the European Union (co-decision power for transnational parties in the European Parliament) and the International Labour Organization (tripartite arrangement with employer and labor organizations next to governments in the Governing Council) as exceptions. Instead, other forms of collaboration or coordination are most common. NGOs may participate in specific civil society advisory bodies, be accredited to international conferences, perform services on the part of international institutions, enjoy access to international courts, and make use of complaints procedures for private parties. This brief summary suggests that transnational actors increasingly enjoy access to international institutions and contribute to agenda setting, implementation, and enforcement, but largely remain excluded from the core of international cooperation: the decision-making stage.
Accountability

Access for transnational actors to international institutions holds a promise of enhanced accountability by offering stakeholders opportunities to evaluate and sanction decisionmakers. In the traditional model of international institutions, accountability is a product of member states (principals) holding international officials (agents) accountable through control mechanisms. However, this model offers no means for citizens affected by the decisions and actions of international institutions to express support or discontent. Opening up international institutions to transnational actors could remedy this situation, granting stakeholders a role in the process of securing accountability. This would entail supplementing existing forms of internal accountability with new mechanisms of external accountability.

Accountability through transnational actor involvement may be organized in a variety of ways. The theory of representative democracy places particular emphasis on elections as the central mechanism for citizens to make political choices and hold decisionmakers accountable. Transferring this model to politics beyond the nation-state, cosmopolitan democracy theorists advocate the establishment of legislatures at the global and regional levels. The directly elected and politically influential European Parliament stands as the foremost example, but parliamentary assemblies exist in some other international institutions as well, such as the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Beyond the electoral mechanism, transnational actors may help hold international institutions accountable through legal redress, monitoring of commitments, and policy evaluation. Over the past two decades, these forms of mechanisms have become increasingly prominent. Access for private parties has grown from being a central feature of a limited set of important international courts to becoming a defining feature of the new generation of international courts established since the early 1990s, among them the Central American Court of Justice and the Court of Justice for the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa. Where no formal means of legal redress exist for individuals, there are increasingly other institutionalized means for civil society actors to review policy and monitor commitments, such as submitting independent reports and lodging noncompliance complaints.

Yet the strategy of enhancing accountability through transnational actor involvement is associated with a set of potential pitfalls as well. The proposal to create regional or global parliamentary assemblies has met with great scepticism. Even an enthusiast of civil society involvement, such as Jan Aart Scholte, concludes: “Global legislatures are not the answer to these democratic deficits. Although one or two regional governance frameworks have acquired a popularly elected regional assembly, it is not practicable to transpose this model to transworld institutions.” Not only is the electoral infrastructure for the most part absent and difficult to imagine at a global level,
but in addition there is widespread political resistance to the level of supra-
nationality that such a development would entail, and ultimately the philo-
sophical question of whether the global demos is sufficiently “thick” to allow
for global legislatures.27

Transnational mechanisms of legal redress and monitoring may be a more
viable way of improving the accountability of international institutions. How-
ever, these accountability mechanisms are subject to the same potential prob-
lem of unevenly distributed resources as transnational actor participation in
general. Because it is highly time- and resource-consuming to pursue legal
cases in international courts, collect information on compliance, and evaluate
policy effectiveness, only the best-equipped transnational organizations can
engage in such activities. Even in the EU, with homogenously high levels of
socioeconomic development, variation in legal resources shapes the pattern of
private litigation in the institution’s courts.28

In sum, there is reason to match the optimism about the democratizing po-
tential of transnational actor involvement with an awareness of the challenges
in terms of participation and accountability. We now turn to a second central
component of global governance today: public-private partnerships.

Partnerships and Democratic Values in Global Governance
The global regulatory activity in recent years by actors of transnational civil
society as well as of the global market has given private actors authority in
areas that traditionally belonged to the state. The proliferation of transnational
partnerships in areas of human rights, the environment, and development, as
well as the idea of corporate social responsibility, are illustrations of this trend.
Partnerships vary in the degree of formal institutionalization, operate in a
range of issue areas, and exist at all stages of the policy process. Well-known
examples are the Global Compact and the sustainability partnerships estab-
lished after the Johannesburg Summit in 2002.

Two main approaches in research on partnerships can be discerned. One
emphasizes the potential of partnerships to close governance gaps, create win-
win situations, and improve problem-solving,29 whereas the other is critical of
the increased participation of for-profit businesses in cooperation on global
public goods.30 Existing literature is strong in mapping the growth and variety
of public-private partnerships, but research on the democratic legitimacy of
these arrangements is still young. In the following subsections, we sketch po-
tential democratic promises and pitfalls of transnational partnerships, focusing
on participation and accountability.

Participation
Partnerships hold a promise to further democracy in global governance by
broadening participation and providing spaces for deliberation on global pub-
lic goods. Partnerships are intended to promote learning, dialogue, and the spread of best practices. They can be perceived as forms of deliberative democracy suitable for the global level on the premise that “democracy is more about deliberation, reasoned argument, and public reflection among affected stakeholders than voting and aggregation.”

Partnerships may conform to the ideals of deliberative democracy, especially if participation by civil society actors is high, facilitating linkages to local communities.

The inclusiveness emphasized by models of participatory and deliberative democracy is a potential strength of partnership arrangements. Transnational partnership processes are often highly transparent, include innovative elements that increase participation of affected communities, and contain meaningful deliberation.3 Still, partnerships make visible the trade-offs in actual democratic practice between deliberation and accountability, transparency and deliberation, and between inclusiveness and deliberative quality.

Partnerships also contain democratic pitfalls with regard to participation, primarily concerning the choice of participants and power imbalances. Compared to interstate institutions, transnational partnerships have two main democratic deficits: they are self-mandated and the definition of their relevant constituencies/stakeholders is arbitrary.3 A very inclusive partnership (high input legitimacy) might lead to a lack of efficiency and less problem-solving capacity (low output legitimacy), mirroring a persistent tension in democratic theory. From the point of view of representative democracy, criticism can be directed against ambitions of wide inclusiveness at the expense of clear chains of representation and accountability. Moreover, as participatory democrats would emphasize, power structures and patterns of exclusion prevent partnerships from reducing democratic deficits in global governance. The limited participation of NGOs from the South is part of a broader pattern of Western hegemony in the international system.

Preliminary evidence from different issue areas suggests that arbitrary participation results in limitations in the democratic legitimacy of partnerships. Few global health partnerships include low-income country representation, but they instead provide the commercial sector and purposely selected (Northern) scientists with improved access to decisionmaking within the UN.3 In the environmental realm, partnerships mirror rather than transform existing relations of power between North and South, between governmental and private authority, and global professionals and local grassroots.3 Partnerships in the field of communication technology in developing countries give evidence of market actors constituting the stronger party, as do partnerships on water supply, where the hopes for win-win situations have not been realized. Instead, the interests of the private actors have tended to be determinant: the maximization of profit, the reduction of risk, or the expansion of markets.3

Accordingly, win-win situations may not be realized in practice, despite increased participation.
Accountability

Partnerships hold a promise to contribute to an expansion of accountability mechanisms in global governance. A pluralistic system of accountability can apply to partnerships because electoral and hierarchical accountability are not applicable. Instead, mechanisms of professional/peer accountability, public reputational accountability, market accountability, financial accountability, and to a minor extent legal accountability, come to the fore.38 Arguably, those forms of accountability can apply both to the individual actors of partnerships (NGOs, companies, interstate bodies), to the process dimension of partnerships (selection of participants, transparency), and to the outcomes of partnerships.39 However, several of these mechanisms are not related to democratic accountability, particularly not as conceived of in the model of representative democracy, which emphasizes the electoral contest.

As to pitfalls, it is a common assumption in the literature that accountability is made more difficult in multi-actor partnerships as strong formal accountability mechanisms are absent.40 Chains of both internal and external accountability become diffuse as public and private spheres of responsibility turn more interwoven. Through the lenses of representative democracy, partnerships are problematic because they might make the division of power and responsibility more unclear, and transparency and voter judgments more difficult. Partnership participants are accountable toward rather different kinds of stakeholders. Criticism is directed against partnerships on the grounds that responsibility for decisions and outcomes on public goods ought to rest with democratically accountable governments. Criticism also concerns weak monitoring, the use of market mechanisms, and the fear that governments might use partnerships to sidetrack debate on their own commitments.

Such weaknesses lead to calls for representative democratic institutions to exercise “meta-governance,” in which they should consider how specific partnerships relate to overall policy goals, and how conflicting objectives and governance modes impact the (presumed) public interest.41 The EU could be seen as an example of a “meta-governance” structure.

Still, the assessment of the accountability of partnerships depends on the yardstick applied. It makes a great difference whether partnerships are compared with models of democracy or with the actual performance of interstate institutions. Compared to fundamental systemic inequalities, however, the democratic importance and transformative effects of partnerships appear small. In sum, partnerships illustrate tensions and trade-offs in global governance that need further exploration. In order to gain a more fine-grained understanding of their democratic promises and pitfalls, it is necessary to engage in comparisons within and between issue-areas, as well as between public-private and purely private partnerships. Next, though, we examine the democratic qualities of transnational actors themselves.
Democratic Qualities of Transnational Actors

Transnational actors include profit-seeking transnational corporations as well as various types of value-based civil society actors, ranging from professional NGOs with a formal organizational structure to more diffuse social movements and activist networks. Sometimes, the categories of market and civil society actors are blurred, as in the case of philanthropic foundations. However, civil society actors figure most prominently in the literature on democratic qualities of transnational actors. These actors, as opposed to profit-oriented companies, are typically engaged in the production of public goods and make the strongest claims to contribute to the democratization of global governance. We therefore focus our analysis on civil society actors, even if we also briefly address the democratic credentials of transnational corporations.

There has been a tendency in earlier research to portray civil society actors in a romantic way as champions of democracy and other normatively good causes. Empirical case studies have been biased toward movements and networks campaigning for causes that most people consider desirable. Where democratic problems, such as a lack of accountability or transparency, have been noted, it has mostly been in passing. In recent years, however, there has also been much criticism leveled against transnational NGOs. The legitimacy of these actors has been questioned with reference to their alleged lack of representativeness, accountability, and transparency. Rather than being promising contributors to the democratization of global governance, transnational civil society actors are depicted as themselves being undemocratic. Much of this criticism has come from the perspective of business, states, and international institutions, which are challenged by the radical advocacy of parts of transnational civil society. However, a more nuanced analysis of the legitimacy of transnational actors—focusing on promises as well as pitfalls—is emerging. Attempts to examine the sources of legitimacy of civil society actors have focused on aspects like the representation and empowerment of marginalized groups, moral authority based on values and norms, and financial and political independence. Furthermore, studies have pointed to how transnational NGOs, acting in a context of state failure, may derive legitimacy from the failing legitimacy of states. Although such a broad analysis of civil society legitimacy is useful, we also need to be more specific about the democratic legitimacy of transnational actors. Hence, we will again focus on problems of participation and accountability.

Participation

Transnational civil society actors hold a promise to contribute to the democratization of global governance, as they often allow for broader and more direct participation than what is common within many states, international institutions, and transnational corporations, where participation in decision-making typically is limited to small elites of decisionmakers. Some transna-
tional NGOs try to facilitate the participation of marginalized groups at the grassroots level. More diffuse transnational activist networks also claim democratic legitimacy based on their nonhierarchical form of organization. Without any central decisionmaking body, they claim to allow for equal participation of all parts of the network. From the perspective of deliberative democracy, the World Social Forum could be perceived as an attempt to develop a platform for transnational democratic deliberation within an emerging global civil society.

It might be argued that the participation of all stakeholders is often neither practically possible nor democratically necessary. Even if participation and formal representation of constituencies is lacking, transnational NGOs may represent the ideas and voices of their stakeholders. Margaret Keck argues that civil society activists in international institutions represent “positions rather than populations, ideas rather than constituencies.” This is what she calls “discursive representation.”

However, there are also democratic pitfalls associated with transnational civil society involvement. Participatory and deliberative democrats are rightly concerned about the elitist character of many transnational NGOs. When it comes to actual participation, there tends to be a bias in favor of well-educated middle-class activists from rich countries. The relative lack of participation from the “global South” is often stressed as a severe problem. Structural inequalities based on class, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and religion may be reproduced within transnational civil society.

Moreover, even if we focus on discursive rather than actual representation, there are potential problems. Proponents of representative democracy point out that many NGOs do not represent their claimed constituencies in a proper way. In some cases, there have been direct conflicts of interest between transnational NGOs and their claimed constituencies. Whereas transnational NGOs focusing on the abuse of women in the sex industry aim at abolishing prostitution in order to save the “victims,” grassroots groups of “sex workers” have argued against being depicted as victims and instead called for the recognition of their human rights as sex workers. Similarly, there is a conflict between Western-based NGOs that strive to abolish all kinds of child labor and organizations of child workers that hope to improve working conditions and stop the human rights abuses against child workers.

Accountability

There are promising aspects of transnational civil society actors in terms of accountability as well. Some membership-based transnational NGOs hold regular elections for leadership positions, hence having the same electoral accountability as democratic states. Nevertheless, there are generally less formal accountability mechanisms applicable to NGOs than to other transnational actors. This, however, does not necessarily mean that NGOs are less account-
able. NGOs typically are better at consulting with less powerful stakeholders, and the aforementioned participatory qualities can be seen as a form of downward accountability.

Several transnational NGOs have themselves taken steps to increase their accountability. Examples include the INGO Accountability Charter, signed by representatives of prominent advocacy-oriented transnational NGOs, including Amnesty International, Greenpeace, OXFAM, and Save the Children; the Global Accountability Project (GAP), run by the One World Trust; and the Code of Ethics Project, initiated by the World Association of NGOs. These initiatives typically include codes of conduct, improved transparency, and mechanisms for stakeholder monitoring and evaluation.

Despite such recent initiatives, the accountability of transnational civil society actors remains a potential democratic pitfall. Civil society groups typically operate very limited internal accountability mechanisms. Unlike governments in democratic states, the leadership of most civil society groups is not elected by any constituency, hence lacking the formal accountability mechanisms valued by proponents of representative democracy. Moreover, in terms of external accountability, the very broad and diffuse set of stakeholders risks undermining the notion of accountability, because being accountable to all means being accountable to no one. This problem is amplified in more diffuse nonhierarchical networks that lack obvious power centers, where it is unclear who the power holders are as well.

Despite the claim that NGOs are accountable to less powerful stakeholders rather than to states and international institutions, downward accountability has often been neglected in practice. Traditional models of accountability tend to privilege powerful stakeholders and fail to address participatory aspects. Furthermore, most of the accountability initiatives taken by transnational NGOs themselves rely on voluntary mechanisms and lack any formal sanctions. Such self-regulatory mechanisms are seldom effective.

Some observers have suggested that the increasing demands on transnational NGOs to improve their accountability—rather than the lack of accountability—constitute a democratic problem. Different conceptions of accountability can lead to conflicting expectations and undermine organizational effectiveness—what Jonathan Koppell labels “multiple accountabilities disorder.” Furthermore, accountability often takes the form of technocratic mechanisms for supervision and control, whereas questions of what constitute democratic forms of accountability tend to be neglected.

We conclude this section by moving beyond civil society actors to transnational corporations (TNCs). Unlike some transnational civil society groups that can claim legitimacy based on broader participation, including relatively marginalized and resource-poor actors, TNCs do hardly score high on participation. Decisionmaking within TNCs is typically limited to the top management and major shareholders, with few possibilities for external stake-
holders to have any influence. Concerning accountability, however, it is sometimes argued that TNCs are actually subject to more formal accountability mechanisms than are civil society actors. Nevertheless, there are obvious pitfalls in the accountability of TNCs too. TNCs can be held accountable through national legal systems of host or home countries (and in some cases other countries as well) but are often able to escape this form of accountability at the national level. Given their global reach, TNCs can pick and choose between national regulations. TNCs also claim to derive their accountability from the market (shareholders and consumers), but this form of accountability depends on stakeholders having sufficient resources to make their preferences felt in the market. Consumer choice is generally not an effective accountability mechanism because consumer awareness and alternative choices typically are limited, and the people who are most directly and negatively affected by TNCs often are unable to exercise any consumer power. An informal type of accountability mechanism is the monitoring of TNC activities by advocacy NGOs. Self-regulation in the form of codes of conduct, and voluntary monitoring and reporting manifested in the discourse on Corporate Social Responsibility, have become increasingly common in dealing with the accountability gap of TNCs. However, the lack of enforcement mechanisms leads to credibility problems.

From this brief overview it should be clear that despite much recent attention to the accountability of transnational actors, there are still substantial democratic deficits. Rather than just focusing on specific technical accountability mechanisms, which is the trend in much of the literature reviewed here, we should try to understand accountability, as well as participation, in relation to different models of democracy. Participation requirements and accountability mechanisms applied to transnational actors should have a base in normative democratic theory.

Conclusion
This article has initiated an inquiry into the promises and pitfalls of transnational actors in the democratization of global governance. Certain common promises have been identified across the three components of governance examined here. One is that increased participation can enhance democratic legitimacy. Another common promise is a potential to strengthen external accountability. With regard to pitfalls, international institutions, partnerships, and individual transnational actors all face a challenge in that participation often is unbalanced. In addition, external accountability may be compromised by the difficulty of establishing who the stakeholders are. Overall, we find that the vision of democratizing global governance through transnational actors is characterized by difficult trade-offs between different democratic values, such as inclusiveness versus accountability, deliberation versus transparency, pa-
Based on our findings, we conclude this article by outlining an agenda for future research. First, we believe that a combination of normative political theory and thorough empirical research is a fruitful path for further inquiry into the problems and potentials of democracy in global governance. At present, existing research tends to fall into one of two categories. On the one hand, there is a huge literature within the field of normative democratic theory that suffers from a shortage of empirical observations on actual processes. As a result, the promises of transnational actors as forces of global democratization are often exaggerated. On the other hand, there is a growing empirical literature on legitimacy and accountability in global governance, which is rather technical and often lacks a firm base in democratic theory. As a consequence, the pitfalls of transnational actor participation are often exaggerated. In this article, we have sought to arrive at a more balanced account of promises and pitfalls by drawing on alternative models of democracy and reporting empirical patterns from the practices of global governance. This approach could be further developed in future research.

If empirical studies of processes of democratization in global governance are not based on a thorough problematization of what global democracy can and should mean, the empirical analysis will lack precision and theoretical depth and there is a risk that processes are labeled democratic although they do not make much sense in relation to any elaborated democratic theory. Conceptual stretching concerning terms like democracy and democratization is problematic for normative as well as analytical reasons. Identifying certain processes in global governance as democratic contributes to the legitimization of these processes. To avoid such problems, there is a need for substantial development of normative democratic theory as a point of departure and reference for systematic empirical analyses. Such an exercise should ideally be carried out in collaboration between political theorists and empirically oriented scholars and contribute to the development of a range of indicators of democratization in global governance that may be observed and assessed in empirical studies.

Second, we call for more ambitious comparative research. Existing empirical studies on transnational actors in global governance, on which we have drawn in this article, are heavily dominated by single-case studies. There is a need for systematic comparisons across issue-areas, including not only cases from issue-areas where transnational activity is particularly prominent, such as trade, development, and the environment, but also from issue-areas where state interests circumscribe the room for transnational organization, such as health, security, and migration. An ambitious comparative design should also allow for the inclusion of cases from different parts of the world, hence avoiding the Northern or Western bias that characterizes much previous research on
transnational organization. Moreover, future research should focus not only on “successful” cases in which transnational actors have contributed to a democratization of a specific global governance arrangement, but also on cases of failed attempts at democratization and processes of de-democratization.

Third, there is need for more elaborate research on different types of transnational actors. Whereas existing studies of transnational organization in global governance tend to focus either on nonprofit actors (NGOs, social movements, and advocacy networks) or profit actors (TNCs), we call for research on processes that involve the whole spectrum of transnational actors and assess the democratic credentials of various types of actors. Different kinds of transnational actors play different roles in relation to international institutions and partnerships in global governance, and they do not necessarily have to be democratic in the same way and to the same extent. Generally speaking, the greater the impact of a governance arrangement or actor on people’s living conditions and well-being, the more important that it is democratic. A more systematic categorization of transnational actors is necessary in order to further pursue this line of inquiry.

Fourth and finally, given the pitfalls we have identified in this article, we also point to a need for broader dialogue on the role of global democracy as an overarching universal good in international relations. For example, is democracy beyond the state an intrinsic or instrumental value—that is, an end in itself or a means to achieve other ends, such as justice? This opens up a discussion on the relationship between global democracy, other standards of legitimacy, and the role of values such as equity and justice in global governance.51

Notes
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12. Ibid., p. 29.


22. Held, Democracy and the Global Order.


33. Ibid.


49. Jonathan Koppell, “Pathologies of Accountability: ICANN and the Challenge
