

RSC 2021/76  
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies  
Global Governance Programme-453

# WORKING PAPER

**The bureaucratic politics of WTO priorities:  
Where officials sit influences where they stand**

Bernard Hoekman and Robert Wolfe



European University Institute

**Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies**

Global Governance Programme

**The bureaucratic politics of WTO priorities:  
Where officials sit influences where they stand**

Bernard Hoekman and Robert Wolfe

RSC Working Paper 2021/76

ISSN 1028-3625

© Bernard Hoekman and Robert Wolfe, 2021

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 \(CC-BY 4.0\) International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the series and number, the year and the publisher.

Published in November 2021 by the European University Institute.  
Badia Fiesolana, via dei Roccettini 9  
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
Italy  
[www.eui.eu](http://www.eui.eu)

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual author(s) and not those of the European University Institute.

This publication is available in Open Access in Cadmus, the EUI Research Repository:



With the support of the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

The European Commission supports the EUI through the European Union budget. This publication reflects the views only of the author(s), and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

## Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

The Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, created in 1992 and currently directed by Professor Brigid Laffan, aims to develop inter-disciplinary and comparative research on the major issues facing the process of European integration, European societies and Europe's place in 21<sup>st</sup> century global politics.

The Centre is home to a large post-doctoral programme and hosts major research programmes, projects and data sets, in addition to a range of working groups and *ad hoc* initiatives. The research agenda is organised around a set of core themes and is continuously evolving, reflecting the changing agenda of European integration, the expanding membership of the European Union, developments in Europe's neighbourhood and the wider world.

For more information: <http://eui.eu/rscas>

The EUI and the RSC are not responsible for the opinion expressed by the author(s).

## The Global Governance Programme

The Global Governance Programme is one of the flagship programmes of the Robert Schuman Centre. It is a community of outstanding professors and scholars, that produces high quality research and engages with the world of practice through policy dialogue. Established and early-career scholars work on issues of global governance within and beyond academia, focusing on four broad and interdisciplinary areas: Global Economics, Europe in the World, Cultural Pluralism and Global Citizenship.

The Programme also aims to contribute to the fostering of present and future generations of policy and decision makers through its executive training programme: the Academy of Global Governance, where theory and 'real world' experience meet and where leading academics, top-level officials, heads of international organisations and senior executives discuss on topical issues relating to global governance.

For more information: <http://globalgovernanceprogramme.eui>



## **Abstract**

An original survey of trade policy officials is used to estimate ordered probit discrete choice models to explore a factor not usually considered in analyses of international negotiations: the extent to which representatives of member states and officials based in capitals agree on priorities for cooperation. The analysis reveals that representatives of World Trade Organization (WTO) member states often accord substantially different priorities to policy issues and WTO reform areas than officials based in capitals. This “Geneva effect” varies between officials representing Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries and non-OECD countries, reflecting potential differences in bureaucratic capacity of capitals and the autonomy accorded to Geneva missions on different types of issues. The results suggest that the prospects of international cooperation may be influenced not only by well-understood differences between states that reflect material interests and domestic political economy drivers, but by internal differences regarding relative priorities. An implication is that studies of international organizations should consider the possibility that representatives of states may have different priorities (preferences) than officials based in capitals.

## **Keywords**

International cooperation; capacity; autonomy; WTO reform; Miles’ Law.





## Introduction\*

Sir Henry Wooton is said to have quipped in 1604 that an ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for the commonwealth.<sup>1</sup> He meant merely that ambassadors reside abroad, not that they speak falsely, but that does not imply that ambassadors automatically transmit the views of the sending state. Scholars frequently look for gaps in how officials execute the wishes of politicians, and in how international organizations (IOs) respond to the views of their members. Focusing on the World Trade Organization (WTO), in this paper we look instead for gaps between resident ambassadors and their capitals, using an original survey of trade officials' priorities to explore an additional factor not usually considered in the international relations, law, or economics literatures. Negotiation outcomes, both on substantive issues and institutional reform, may be affected by differences in priorities accorded to issues by officials in Geneva delegations and their capitals. Where trade policy officials sit may influence where they stand.

The WTO, the central institution of the international trade regime, supplies information on applied trade policies and provides mechanisms for its members to engage in trade negotiations and resolve trade disputes. In the first two decades after its establishment in 1995 the WTO performed these functions relatively well.<sup>2</sup> Members negotiated several economically meaningful new agreements, they welcomed thirty-six new states, and they used WTO committees and the independent, de-politicized dispute settlement system to monitor and enforce implementation of the agreements. Until recently, the main blemish on WTO performance was the limited success in negotiating additional market access liberalization and updating WTO rules in the Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations. The reasons for the failure are complex but include insistence by high-income countries on greater reciprocity from emerging economies and more broadly, eroding domestic political support for the WTO in OECD countries, most notably in the US (VanGrasstek, 2021).

The WTO impasse became a crisis following US refusal to appoint new adjudicators to its Appellate Body because of increasing dissatisfaction with its operation, leading the appeals mechanism ceasing to function at the end of 2019.<sup>3</sup> WTO reform is now a general priority, with many proposals by members on how to improve the organization.<sup>4</sup> Suggestions fall into two categories: 'fixing the machine' – reforming working practices and reviving the dispute settlement function – and priority areas for cooperation, both substantive policy areas and

---

\* This paper builds on the results of a survey of trade officials and practitioners undertaken in 2020 in collaboration with Matteo Fiorini, Petros Mavroidis and Doug Nelson. We are hugely indebted to Matteo Fiorini for his assistance with the empirical analysis of the survey data we use in this paper and grateful to Michael Bauer, Sarah Davidson Ladly, Manfred Elsig, Julia Gray, Douglas Nelson, Stephanie Rickard, Evan Rogerson, and Peter Ungphakorn for helpful comments and suggestions on previous drafts.

<sup>1</sup> This familiar version of what Wooton called a 'merriment' is from Bartlett's. The Latin was said by Isaak Walton to be *Legatus est vir bonus peregre missus ad mentiendum Reipublicae causa*. Mattingly (1962, 314 n.7, 239) translates it as "A resident ambassador is a good man sent to lie abroad for his country's good."

<sup>2</sup> See e.g., Elsig et al. (2016).

<sup>3</sup> The US veto was made possible by the WTO working practice of consensus-based decision making. Although in principle members could have resorted to a vote, in practice voting does not occur in the WTO. See e.g., Mavroidis (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Examples include China (WTO, 2019a), EU (European Commission, 2021), United States (WTO, 2019b; 2019c), Canada (as leader of the so-called Ottawa Group) (<https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2019/05/ottawa-group-and-wto-reform.html>), and proposals by other groups of WTO Members (e.g., WTO, 2021c).

negotiating modalities.<sup>5</sup> The latter include two key issues: (i) recognizing and addressing differences in economic development so as to assist those most in need; and (ii) whether and how plurilateral agreements that apply on a nondiscriminatory basis but bind only signatories fit into the WTO framework (Hoekman and Sabel, 2021; Tu and Wolfe, 2021). Reform discussions are not new for the organization. The failure of the 1999 WTO Ministerial meeting in Seattle and the collapse of the 2003 WTO Ministerial Conference in Cancun led to the establishment of two expert groups that produced reports on possible WTO reforms,<sup>6</sup> while provoking a stream of academic proposals.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper we make two contributions to the literature. First, we use a survey that collected information on views of trade officials regarding the priority accorded to a range of issues that have been the subject of submissions to the WTO and academic scholarship to examine a neglected relationship in studies of IOs: the possibility of differing perspectives within WTO members. We estimate ordered probit models that reveal that Geneva-based delegates and officials based in capitals often accord substantially different priorities to WTO reform areas. The degree of alignment in views between officials accredited to an international organization and in capitals is a dimension of international cooperation that has been relatively neglected not just in studies of the WTO but more broadly in IO research.

Second, we generate new evidence on a “Geneva effect” by estimating the extent to which priorities vary *within* and *across* WTO members. That variance reflects potential differences in bureaucratic capacity of capitals and autonomy accorded to Geneva missions on different types of issues. We differentiate between officials representing Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries and non-OECD countries. We find only limited support for a general Geneva effect – defined as delegates from both OECD and non-OECD countries having a common view on what constitute high priority actions that differ substantially from that of capitals. We find several issues, however, for which there is evidence of such a Geneva effect, suggesting that studies of international cooperation should consider this possibility. Conversely, we find suggestive evidence for national bureaucratic capacity and autonomy of delegations as a factor influencing differences in perceived priorities between Geneva missions and capitals. Our analysis also indicates the salience of insights from the public administration literature. A general implication is that a version of Miles’ Law (Miles, 1978) may apply to international cooperation: where officials sit may determine where they stand on an issue.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 1, we discuss why Geneva and capitals might hold different views, focusing on the differences in the type of interactions, relationships and working practices that may characterize the two settings, discuss the related literature, and present our research question and associated hypotheses. Section 2 describes the survey that generated the data, the discrete choice model framework and the approach used to present the results of the empirical analysis. Section 3 discusses the resulting estimates of the degree of alignment in priorities of Geneva and capital-based officials. Section 4 reports findings relating to the possible role of national bureaucratic capacity and autonomy accorded to Geneva missions across types of issues, differentiating between officials of countries that are a member of the OECD and officials affiliated with non-OECD countries, and consider whether

---

<sup>5</sup> See e.g., Bertelsmann Stiftung (2018), Wolfe (2020; 2021), Evenett and Baldwin (2020), Fitzgerald (2020), Ismail (2020) and Hoekman, Tu and Wang (2021).

<sup>6</sup> Sutherland (2004) and Warwick Commission (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Research on WTO reform stimulated by the divisive ministerials in 1999 (Seattle) and 2003 (Cancun) spanned law (e.g., Steger 2010), IR (e.g., Elsig and Dupont, 2012), economics (e.g., Lawrence, 2006) and contributions by former negotiators (e.g., Ismail, 2009). Deere-Birkbeck and Monagle (2009) and Hoekman (2012) survey the issues and discuss the literature of this period.

OECD membership is associated with greater alignment of priorities among officials in capitals of OECD nations. Section 5 concludes.

### **1. The bureaucratic politics of trade policy – at home and in Geneva**

The extensive literature on bureaucratic politics provoked by Allison's explanations for the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 (Allison, 1971) reshaped the literature on foreign policy. By disaggregating the decision maker into a collection of competing individuals and organizations, Allison undermined the realist assumption that states behave as rational, unitary actors (Jones, 2017). Critiques of the rational unitary actor model note how it underplays the ideas and interests of officials, among other problems. We use the concept as a simple heuristic, not a model, best captured in Miles (1978), which supports an expectation that officials in capitals may have different priorities than their colleagues in Geneva because they have different responsibilities and perspectives. These gaps within the state are not well captured in existing accounts of multilateral cooperation.

The WTO is "member-driven" to a much greater degree than other economic IOs such as the IMF and World Bank that are governed by executive bodies and have secretariats with a significant degree of autonomy.<sup>8</sup> The role of the WTO Secretariat as an actor is circumscribed by design—the Director-General, for example, is not expected to try to advance negotiations (Wolff, 2021). All WTO members have missions called Permanent Delegations that are headed by an official styled "Ambassador and Permanent Representative". These missions are staffed by anywhere from one or two to a dozen or more officials. Most will be from the trade ministry, but some will come from finance or agriculture ministries. We refer to all these people as "delegates" or "representatives" of their countries. Some missions are not resident in Geneva, at one extreme; others are supplemented by subject experts coming from the capital for many or all substantive meetings. In many countries, the Geneva ambassador is their country's principal advisor to the minister on WTO matters, responsible for attempting to generate a coordinated position from other officials in the capital. In other cases, the ambassador may receive detailed instructions from the capital. Most officials return to their home ministry after a few years in Geneva—they are called "permanent" to differentiate them from officials who come from capitals for specific meetings. Ambassadors meet as the General Council, the Council for Trade in Goods, the Council for Trade in Services, the Dispute Settlement Body, the Trade Policy Review Body, and the Trade Negotiations Committee – the governance bodies of the organization.<sup>9</sup> They or their staff or officials from their capital participate in the many subsidiary bodies that are responsible for the implementation of the agreements contained in the WTO. They also interact in negotiating groups. The Secretariat supports these bodies but does not set the agenda.

At home, trade officials must deal with other ministries, industry interests and civil society—some trade ministries must defer to more powerful domestic ministries in formulating national policy while others may maintain a hard line independent of the positions other ministries might prefer. In Geneva, representatives confront 163 other members and must work within the confines of how things are done in the WTO. A consequence of the different geographic settings in which trade officials operate, including who they interact with, is that views on priorities for the WTO may be influenced by where they sit. The presumption in the IR and

---

<sup>8</sup> In the terminology of Knill et al. (2019), the WTO secretariat operates in a 'servant style' – in contrast to other international public administrations that seek to influence through advocacy and engage in entrepreneurial activity. Karns and Mingst (2013) classify the WTO as a forum organization rather than a service, regulatory, or technical body.

<sup>9</sup> Hoekman and Kosteci (2009) and Mavroidis (2016) provide comprehensive treatments of the WTO.

economics literature is that delegates represent national interests, and that those interests reflect either material factors, or the political economy of domestic policy formation. Thus, delegations (missions) accredited to the WTO in Geneva represent their countries in negotiations and monitoring of implementation and enforcement of trade policy commitments embedded in negotiated trade agreements. This multilateral diplomacy, however, is not a smooth translation of national preferences by permanent representatives acting as a conveyor belt or diplomatic intermediary, merely implementing instructions received from the capital (Pouliot, 2016, 131).

The IR literature has identified many potential factors that influence the ability of IOs to adapt to changing circumstances, including the degree of independence of the associated secretariats, openness, authority, size, and scope (Hooghe et al. 2019). Much of this literature centers on IO secretariats and uses a principal-agent (PA) analytical framework (Hawkins et al. 2006). Public administration scholars have noted that IO secretariats comprise international bureaucracies that can have their own agendas after the pioneering work in IR of Barnett and Finnemore (2004), exploring the relationship between politics and administration. Recent research in this vein includes a focus on the extent to which international institutions are independent actors (Ege et al, 2021). Here also a PA framework often is used to understand the operation of IOs. This conceptualization helps understand how slack between signatory governments and their agents – international public administrations associated with the relevant IOs – can stymie the realization of the objectives of principals.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars have used the PA approach to consider the influence of the WTO Secretariat on the composite or collective principal (member states), working through delegates (Jinnah, 2010) and modified the PA framework by regarding Ambassadors (and more broadly Geneva missions) as “proximate principals” who form part of a “complex agent” with the WTO Secretariat (Elsig, 2010; 2011). The most salient application of the PA framework to the WTO is to its dispute settlement mechanism, reflecting the delegation by the collective principal (member states) of substantial discretion in adjudicating trade disputes to an international bureaucracy – the Appellate Body (Cortell and Peterson, 2006). Overall, however, as a forum the WTO has very limited agency and its Secretariat has little discretion.<sup>11</sup> Members use the forum to conclude negotiations and monitor the implementation of the results, with the Geneva missions (national representatives) driving daily activities. While those missions are not “delegates” of their government in a principal-agent sense (there is no delegation of sovereignty), Geneva-based representatives of member states may have priorities that differ from capitals.

Our assumption is that in a “member-driven” organization, outcomes depend on the members rather than the Secretariat as an international public administration. We focus, therefore, on the relationship between Geneva missions and counterparts in capitals, an under-analyzed dimension of international cooperation in IOs. We are not aware of studies that consider the relations of WTO ambassadors with their capitals. Ambassadors and their capitals do not have different incentives in the usual sense (missions have no control over their own budgets) but they may have a degree of autonomy. The idea of bureaucratic autonomy in the sense of agencies having autonomy from central administrations is well understood in a national context (Wonka and Rittberger, 2010). We conceive of autonomy as meaning a range

---

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Hawkins et al. (2006). In practice principals will often be a composite or collective, depending on the number of member states and their relative power or influence.

<sup>11</sup> This has been found repeatedly in empirical analyses of IOs. Ege and Bauer (2017) develop indicators documenting the WTO Secretariat has less autonomy than the staff of the World Bank or the IMF. Heldt and Schmidtke (2017) conclude the WTO has limited capabilities for performing a broad array of more complex task reflecting constrained financial and staff resources.

of independent actions available to actors (Heldt, 2017, 473) and the capacity to develop independent preferences (Bauer and Ege, 2017, 8).

In what follows, we consider potential hypotheses that can result in differences in perceived priorities between representatives in Geneva and officials in capitals. A *first possibility* is that the multilateral diplomatic practices of a given setting shape the views of all permanent representatives that operate in that context. Scholars of organizational culture have looked at the world of IOs as complex bureaucracies, but they tend not to consider the work of permanent representatives (Nelson and Weaver, 2016; but see Elsig and Milewicz, 2017). The idea here is that political dynamics of Geneva cannot be fully explained without considering diplomatic practices (Pouliot, 2016, 5). Ambassadors cannot escape the practices that constitute the social order of the WTO.<sup>12</sup> We ask whether something in the social context of Geneva that we do not observe leads national officials to respond differently than their own otherwise similar colleagues in capitals. It might be local diplomatic practices, or socialization changing understandings of power and interest, perhaps through persuasion or social influence (Johnston, 2001).<sup>13</sup> It might also be the perceived need to reach agreement (Lewis, 2005). Such a Geneva effect may result in Geneva-based officials, largely independent of country affiliation and thus idiosyncratic national trade interests, placing greater priority on addressing an issue than do capitals, which is neither an instance of group think nor evidence of an epistemic community. In general, non-alignment of views of Geneva-based representatives with those in capitals may arise because of asymmetric information on organizational matters or differences in assessments on what is feasible.

A *second possibility*, a conditional form of the Geneva effect hypothesis, is that Geneva-based officials may rank order priorities differently from each other as well as from capitals, and that Geneva delegates may differ in the degree of divergence from their capitals. We use membership in the OECD to test this possibility. The conditional possibility centres on bureaucratic capacity in capitals that has an impact on the relative autonomy of Geneva officials. Positions taken in Geneva (perspectives held) will differ depending on the degree of de facto autonomy of ambassadors. The degree of autonomy from capitals will vary across countries but we expect it to be greater when trade policy capacity in the capital is limited, or when a matter tabled in a WTO body does not affect national interests (Odell, 2005; Panke, Polat and Hohlstein, 2021).

We assume that OECD membership proxies for capacity as OECD member countries tend to be high-income countries with sophisticated bureaucracies, but also that OECD membership is associated with shared economic governance principles and frequent interactions on a range of economic policy issues. A commonality of view within government (i.e., Geneva representatives and officials in capitals) is more likely to occur among countries that are likeminded, interact regularly and work together to assess economic policies and determine what constitutes good practice. The OECD is a prominent example of such a grouping of countries, one reason why in what follows we contrast the views of officials from OECD member countries with those of non-OECD nations.

We have a different set of assumptions for why non-OECD ambassadors might have common views. Given competing demands on their time, for example from the UN organizations in Geneva to which many ambassadors are also accredited, and specific trade interests in only a few sectors, delegations that have significant autonomy may be more open to influence by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and IOs in Geneva willing to invest

---

<sup>12</sup> One could make a similar claim about the diplomatic practices of the Organization of American States, which new representatives sometimes struggle to master. Private communication.

<sup>13</sup> Examples of analysis of state-level socialization include Greenhill (2015) on the diffusion of human rights norms and Murdoch et al. (2019) on socialization of staff members of the European Commission.

resources to pursue their agenda by assisting with speaking notes, briefs and so on. There is anecdotal evidence for such a claim (Ostry, 2006), but it has never been tested (Burstein, 2021). Examples include the role of NGOs in Geneva in assisting the African Group in crafting the positions that led to the 2001 Declaration on TRIPS and Public Health, a process that largely played out in Geneva (Odell and Sell, 2006). In 2002, civil society groups influenced the strategy developed by West African cotton producers (Eagleton-Pierce, 2011, 319), with several of the international NGOs who were linked to the resulting cotton initiative partly funded from Geneva (Trommer, 2014; Elsig and Stucki, 2012). The South Centre was a source for several papers put forward by the G-33<sup>14</sup> in early debates on the “special safeguard mechanism” for agriculture and this NGO continued to work with this group of countries in subsequent negotiations (Hannah, Scott and Wilkinson, 2018).

Structural factors, such as a nation’s trade policy capacity and specialization in global trade may also give rise to local group dynamics in Geneva that in turn may result in differences in priorities accorded to issues by Geneva missions representing non-OECD countries and capitals. All delegations, but especially smaller ones, must work in coalitions to be effective in the complex WTO setting. Interactions with colleagues in Geneva may shape delegates’ views, especially insofar as they rely on their colleagues to get information and formulate a position on a given issue. Representatives of small countries with very few defensive interests (who could be expected to be more ambitious) may get swept up in the politics of coalition groupings in Geneva. Delegates that can (must) act with looser instructions from capitals may end up with a significant proportion of their positions being defined locally in the dynamics of group politics (Pouliot, 2016, 143). Alternatively, low capacity in the capital may lead to an instruction to the permanent representative to join the position of a specified coalition, whatever it is.

The *third possibility* is that convergence may also occur among capital-based officials because of regular interaction in outside the WTO. We expect that officials in capitals that participate in such interactions are more likely to accord similar levels of priority to issues. Given the intensity of focus and interaction on economic policy issues in OECD meetings, such convergence in priorities is likely to be more pronounced for capital-based officials of OECD member countries.

Our survey data permit evaluation of three main hypotheses about the bureaucratic politics of trade policy priorities. The first is the existence of a general Geneva effect reflected in differences in the priority accorded to issues by Geneva and capitals. The second is that national bureaucratic capacity conditions the degree of autonomy of Geneva delegations. The third is that officials in capitals of OECD countries will be more aligned than their counterparts in non-OECD capitals on the priority accorded to substantive negotiating issues because of joint work and regular interaction in the context of the OECD.

Our hypotheses can be formalized as follows:

H1: Geneva effect: Miles’ Law affects all trade officials leading to significant differences between Geneva and capitals in the importance accorded to institutional and policy issues.

H2: Bureaucratic capacity constraints lead to greater autonomy for Geneva officials representing non-OECD countries than for OECD nations; non-OECD officials in Geneva will therefore be more likely to diverge more from capitals than officials from OECD countries.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> The so-called “Friends of Special Products” in agriculture, a coalition of developing countries pressing for flexibility for developing countries to undertake limited market opening in agriculture (Wolfe, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Our data do not permit us to differentiate between the bureaucratic capacity hypothesis and the hypothesis that Geneva delegations have more autonomy on institutional matters on which capitals are less informed and less

H3: Officials in capitals of countries that are OECD members will be more aligned with each other on the priority accorded to WTO issues than officials in non-OECD countries because of the depth of repeated interaction associated with OECD membership.

## **2. Empirical methodology**

Public opinion surveys are a familiar tool for understanding how the mass public thinks about trade (e.g., Brutger and Rathbun, 2021) and IR scholars increasingly use surveys to understand expert opinion.<sup>16</sup> The data used in this paper come from an anonymous expert survey conducted in June 2020 using an online platform.<sup>17</sup> Around 800 responses were received for most of the questions, including from officials, academics, staff of IOs and representatives of non-governmental organizations. Results reflect the individual subjective views on the relative priority attached to an issue, not whether these views correlate with the positions of their governments, or even a respondent's perception of the national position (Panke, Polat and Hohlstein, 2021).<sup>18</sup> All missions accredited to the WTO, including those without an office in Geneva, received the questionnaire.<sup>19</sup> With the exception of the results reported in the appendix, we include only responses from government officials in the analysis here. We sort respondents by whether or not they work in Geneva and whether they identified the nationality of their employer (no nationality information was requested from staff working for the European Commission). The resulting sample comprises 66 officials based in Geneva (47% from non-OECD countries, 42% from OECD countries and 11% that did not specify their nationality) and 146 officials from capitals (49% OECD, 49% non-OECD and 2% with missing nationality). A total of 102 respondents (48%) are from a non-OECD country, 100 (47%) are from an OECD economy, while 10 respondents (5%) did not specify their nationality.<sup>20</sup> For the sample as a whole, one-third work in Geneva and two-thirds work in capitals.

The survey instrument included questions about priorities for improving the operation of the WTO, including enhanced transparency procedures, mechanisms for managing trade conflicts and settling disputes, deepening engagement with stakeholders, and supporting new approaches to negotiations that do not require universal participation, so called plurilateral negotiations, as well as questions about negotiation priorities, including concluding ongoing plurilateral negotiations (so-called joint statement initiatives), fisheries, agriculture and industrial subsidies and revisiting the approach used to recognize differences in levels of economic development. The survey questions are listed in Box 1. The officials responding to the survey would be cognizant of all these issues given that all have been the focus of proposals by WTO members and discussion in WTO bodies (see note 4 above).

---

interested. Both will be associated with more heterogeneity in views between Geneva and capitals than would pertain for OECD countries.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Liese et al. (2021) survey officials in 121 national ministries to assess to what extent they recognized the expert authority of nine international bureaucracies in various economic policy areas; Herold et al. (2021) similarly survey officials in 106 countries to assess whether they consider the policy advice of 13 international bureaucracies. Gray and Slapin (2012) use a survey to assess expert views on the effectiveness of trade agreements.

<sup>17</sup> Fiorini et al. (2021) discuss the sampling frame used, describe the survey instrument and report the full results of the survey.

<sup>18</sup> We do not discount the important literature on national interests and trade policy preferences, or the political economy of domestic trade policy, but the data do not provide information on these issues.

<sup>19</sup> The official WTO Secretariat contact list was used.

<sup>20</sup> In addition to officials, the survey also included responses by 40 staff of non-governmental organizations and 160 staff working in IOs dealing with trade issues. As mentioned, we focus in this paper on government officials.

**Box 1. Survey questions: What priority do you assign to the following issues?**

**A. Institutional Matters – ‘Fixing the Machine’**

1. Improving compliance with notification obligations
2. Monitoring COVID-19 pandemic trade-related measures
3. Strengthening the trade policy monitoring process
4. Use WTO bodies to defusing potential disputes (example: through ‘specific trade concern’ processes)
5. Deepening engagement with stakeholders (example: through thematic sessions of WTO committees)
6. Make virtual meetings and video conferencing standard options for meetings
7. Provide support for plurilateral agreements
8. Analyze the distributional effects across countries of national trade policies
9. Make the Appellate Body operational again
10. Reforming dispute settlement and revisiting the role of appellate review

**B. Substantive Negotiation Priorities for the WTO**

11. Resolving differences on special and differential treatment for developing countries
12. Concluding ongoing negotiations on fisheries and agricultural support
13. Concluding ongoing plurilateral negotiations on e-commerce, investment facilitation, regulation of services and MSMEs
14. Negotiating stronger rules on the use of subsidies and industrial policies
15. Clarifying the role of the trade policy in tackling climate change
16. Clarifying WTO role in promoting the sustainable development goals

Note: See Fiorini et al. (2021) for details on the survey instrument used.

Responses to all questions used a 5-point scale: very low (strongly disagree), low (disagree), neutral, high (agree) and very high (strongly agree). The analysis of the responses uses a discrete choice model to estimate alignment or nonalignment of revealed preferences between two groups of respondents on a given issue. The two groups of interest are officials representing OECD member countries and non-OECD member countries. The OECD vs. non-OECD country split is a proxy for the familiar North-South or developed-developing country characterizations of country ‘types’ used in the literature.<sup>21</sup> In addition to being highly correlated with ‘North-South’ or developed-developing groupings, using OECD membership as a criterion for sorting respondents into two country groups is motivated by the fact that OECD member countries have effective bureaucracies (salient for H2) and that officials from OECD countries interact frequently with each other, potentially driving common views on priorities among the capital-based officials who participate in meetings of that organization (salient to H3).

Responses to specific questions (e.g., “What priority do you assign to providing support for plurilateral agreements?”) are the dependent variable of an ordered probit model with a unique

---

<sup>21</sup> Our typology is consistent with Ostry (2006), who argued the formation of the WTO fostered the creation of the G90, a ‘grand’ coalition of non-OECD countries. An alternative approach would be to use indicators of likely bureaucratic capacity to sort countries into groups. We do not do so as OECD membership is a reasonable proxy for capacity for our purposes, because of the hypothesis that OECD membership in itself is a factor that affects views on priorities, and because it allows us to investigate the possibility that the views of Geneva officials differ by type of country.



regressor consisting of a dichotomous variable identifying the two groups whose revealed preferences on that issue we want to compare. The model is specified as  $y^* = \beta D + e$ , where the dependent variable  $y$  is given by the answers to a specific question, with response values ranging from 1 (very low/strongly disagree) to 5 (very high/strongly agree). The regressor of interest is a dummy variable taking value 1 if the respondent belongs to the group of interest (e.g., OECD countries) and 0 if she belongs to the respective baseline group (e.g., non-OECD countries). The latent variable  $y^*$  can be interpreted as the continuous utility from priority being assigned to the issue specified in the specific survey question. The error term  $e$  is assumed to be normal, i.e.,  $e|D$  is distributed as Normal (0,1). The sign of  $\hat{\beta}$  estimated through the ordered probit model using the observed categorical variable  $y$  can be interpreted in terms of the conditional expectation of the associated unobservable latent variable ( $y^*$ , the continuous utility) that is the focus of analysis.

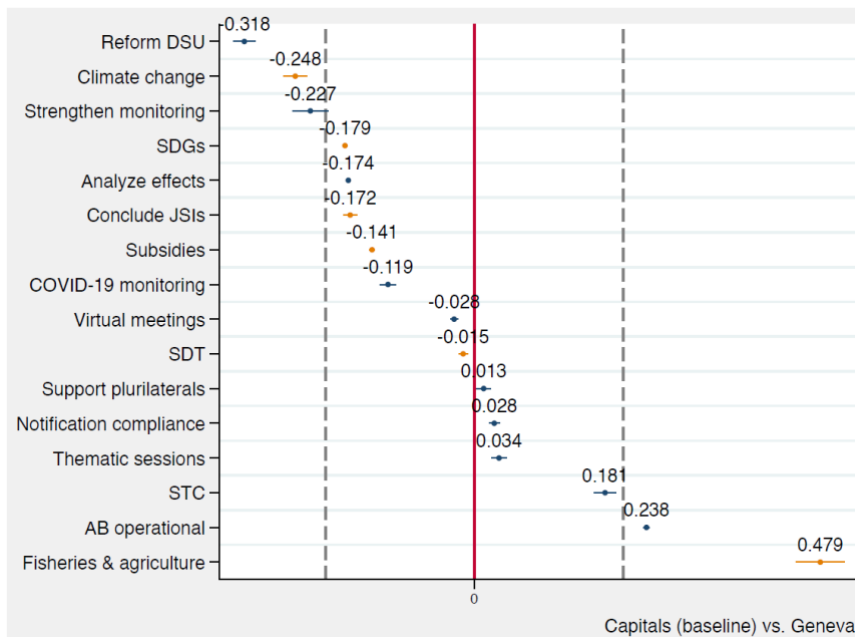
Point estimates and their respective 95% confidence intervals are plotted graphically. The point estimates in each figure indicate whether belonging to a given group is associated with less (if negative) or more utility (if positive) being assigned to the issue in the question, relative to the baseline (comparator) group, which is normalized to equal zero. Estimation of each discrete choice model is done by clustering standard errors at the level of the unique bivariate regressor. The results are statistically significant if the confidence interval does not cross the zero baseline, which is usually the case. If the confidence interval lies completely to the left or completely to the right of the vertical line at 0, the association entailed in the point estimate is statistically significant.

In the figures discussed in what follows the baseline, either respondents based in capitals or respondents representing non-OECD member countries, is represented by the vertical line at 0 on the horizontal axis. In analyses of capital-based vs. Geneva-based officials, point estimates to the right of the 0 line reveal higher utility for delegates in Geneva, while point estimates to the left reveal higher utility for officials in capitals. For analyses comparing non-OECD with OECD member officials, point estimates to the right of the 0 line reveal higher utility for respondents in OECD countries while point estimates to the left reveal higher utility for respondents in non-OECD countries. The horizontal distance from the vertical 0 line indicates the degree of alignment (divergence) in the priority respondents assign to that question. While not salient from a statistical inference perspective, vertical dashed grey lines corresponding to plus and minus the standard deviation of all point estimates are plotted in some of the figures to give a sense of the relative magnitude of the difference in views. For purposes of assisting the discussion of results, where the difference from the point estimate to the baseline is between 0 and 0.10 we consider the two sets of respondents closely aligned.

### **3. Geneva and capitals: on different planets?**

As noted previously our main interest is in three research questions: the extent of divergence between capitals and their delegates in Geneva (the Geneva effect hypothesis), whether any such divergences differ for officials representing OECD and non-OECD countries (the capacity-cum-autonomy hypothesis) and whether priorities of officials of OECD member countries in capitals are more aligned than those of officials in other national capitals. Figure 1 summarizes results for the 16 questions listed in Box 1, comparing Geneva to capitals without controlling for country group. A first finding that emerges is that on most questions officials in Geneva and capitals are not on the same page: where officials sit may indeed affect where they stand.

**Figure 1. Capitals and Geneva often are not aligned**

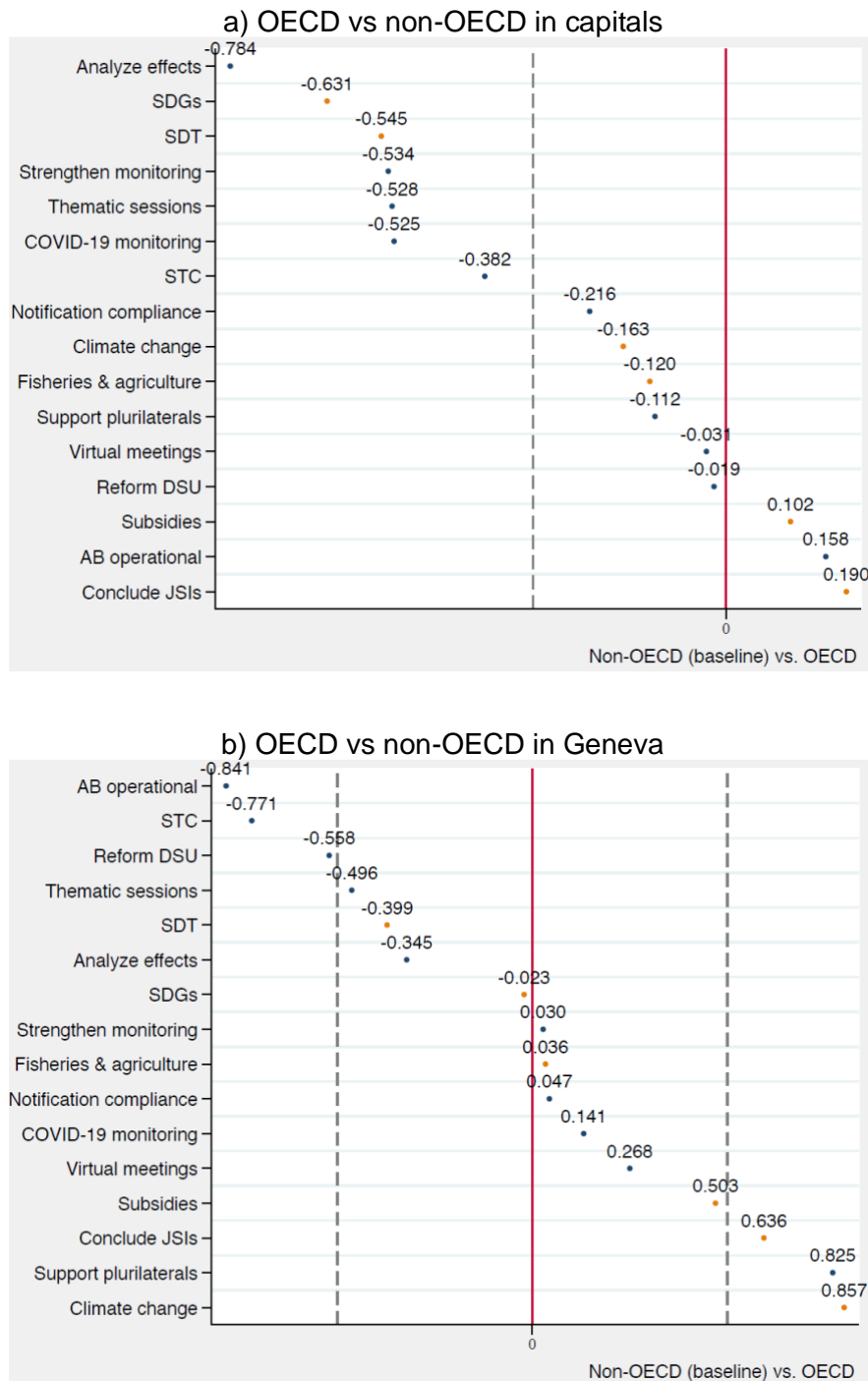


Notes: N=212. Vertical dashed lines indicate the standard deviation of all point estimates reported in the figure.

There are several subjects in Figure 1 where differences are greater than one standard deviation. The most extreme divergence is fisheries and agriculture, which is a much greater priority for Geneva than for capitals. This is important, however, as agreement on fisheries subsidy disciplines is a litmus test for the ability of WTO members to negotiate meaningful outcomes. Also striking are the results for the two dispute settlement questions. Geneva and capitals are far apart, and on opposite sides of the baseline. Capitals accord much greater priority to reforming the dispute settlement mechanism, that is to re-consider conflict resolution processes more broadly. Geneva attaches much greater importance to reviving the Appellate Body.

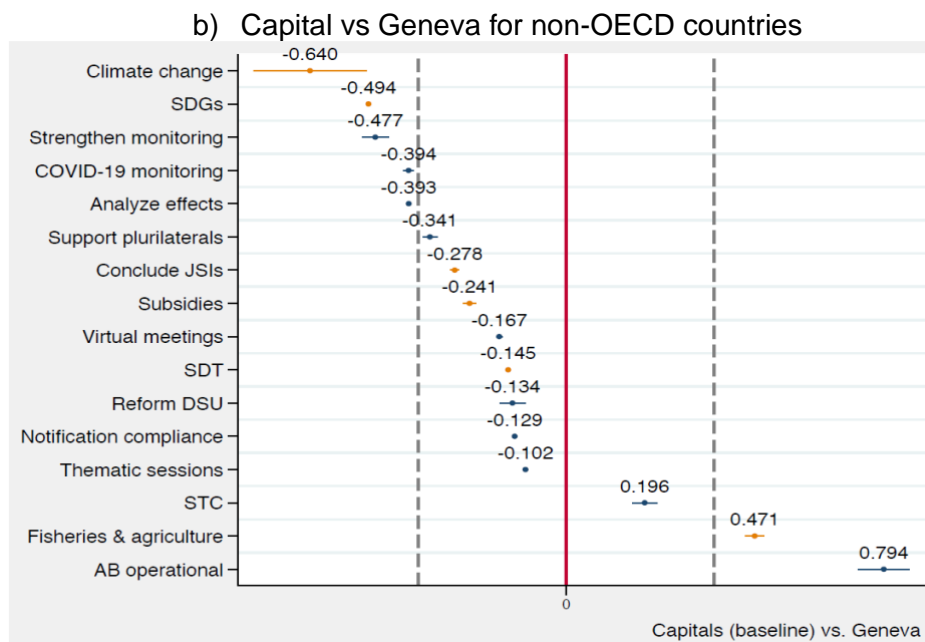
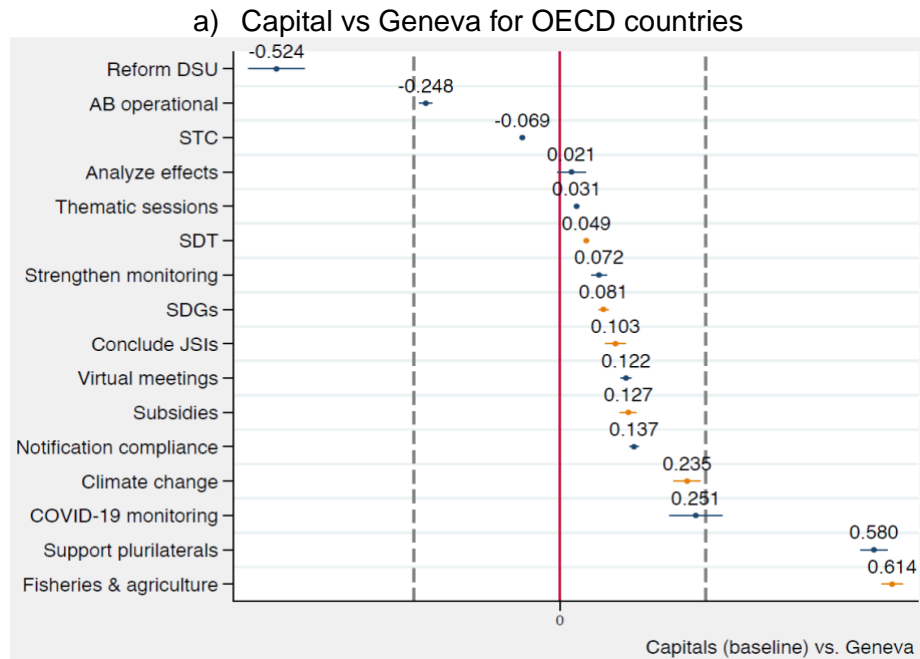
Our first hypothesis implies a Geneva effect, i.e., that multilateral diplomatic practices shape the views of all permanent representatives in a given setting. The evident non-alignment of Geneva and capitals on most issues suggests support for H1. A robust inference would require, however, that that effect is independent of the type of country officials represent, i.e., that officials from OECD and non-OECD countries show similar degrees of non-alignment with capitals. In most instances they do not. Estimations of the degree of alignment between OECD and non-OECD countries as reported in Figure 2 show that there are significant differences across views of officials in these two groups, whether the focus is on Geneva-based representatives or officials in capitals, although there are more instances where views on relative priorities of officials in Geneva are aligned than in capitals (four vs. two).

**Figure 2. OECD and non-OECD views are not aligned**



Focusing more specifically on the question of interaction in Geneva (and conversely among capitals), Figure 3 panels (a) and (b) report estimates for the two sub-groups of officials, revealing that on most issues the two groups differ. Figure 3(a) reveals relatively close alignment between OECD capitals and their Geneva delegates on many issues, while Figure 3(b) suggests less alignment in views of officials in Geneva and capitals affiliated with non-OECD nations.

**Figure 3. Non-alignment between capitals and Geneva: more acute in non-OECD countries**



Note: N=202.

The results reported in Figure 3 suggests that H2 and/or H3 may be informative in that where you stand is conditioned by other factors. Geneva officials from OECD countries attach much greater priority to support for plurilateral initiatives and concluding negotiations on fisheries and agricultural subsidies, and conversely, much less priority to reforming dispute settlement processes than capital-based officials do. Two of these issues relate to the operation of the WTO; one concerns a substantive policy area. Officials from non-OECD countries in Geneva diverge substantially from their colleagues in capitals on many issues, notably fisheries and

agriculture, but the greatest divergence is the perceived priority of reinstating the Appellate Body, where Geneva and capitals are very far apart. This is a matter on which there is also substantial divergence among officials from OECD countries. More important as far as views on the Appellate Body are concerned is the difference in the sign and magnitude of the estimates between delegates representing OECD and non-OECD countries in Geneva.

The estimates reported in Figure 3 suggest a noticeable degree of non-alignment between Geneva and capitals, with Geneva-based officials from OECD countries according greater priority than capitals on most issues. Conversely, officials from non-OECD countries in Geneva attach less priority than capitals to most issues. On five issues non-OECD Geneva officials accord significantly less priority than capitals: trade/climate change, monitoring of regular trade policy and of COVID-19 policies, analysis of effects of WTO agreements, and focusing on trade-SDG linkages. These results suggest only weak support for a common Geneva effect, but they indicate the potential salience of H2 and H3 – discussed further in Section 4. For countries likely to have less bureaucratic capacity in capitals and greater autonomy in Geneva, most of which can be expected to fall into the non-OECD group, the extent of the differences in rank-ordering of priorities is substantial – with alignment (a difference from the baseline that is less than 0.1) observed for only one of sixteen issues.

The survey data do not permit full analysis of corollary hypotheses associated with weaker capacity and/or greater autonomy of Geneva missions as discussed in Section 1: the potential role of coalitions and group formation and entrepreneurial ‘capture’ by NGOs and/or IOs of delegations. Since the overall survey included responses from IO staff and NGOs, we used the data to explore whether there is discernable influence on non-OECD missions in Geneva. Contrary to a common presumption of trade observers, e.g., Ostry (2006), Appendix 1, Figure 1 shows that non-OECD delegates are not aligned with the Geneva-based respondents identifying as being associated with an NGO. While the small number of NGO respondents (nine) results in large confidence intervals and may not be representative, the number of influential trade-focused NGOs located in Geneva is small. There is alignment on only two issues, one of which is on the need to make the Appellate Body operational again, the subject on which there is the greatest divergence between non-OECD Geneva missions and capitals. Appendix 1, Figure 2 shows that non-OECD delegates are aligned or close to aligned with the views expressed by IO respondents on only three issues. Since it is not possible to identify specific IOs in the data, investigating this hypothesis calls for a more targeted survey.

#### **4. Differences in priorities across country groups**

The way the estimates are presented above does not permit straightforward analysis of hypotheses H2 and H3, i.e., that differences in priorities for Geneva and capitals may be associated with capacity differentials and that the degree of alignment in priorities on policy (negotiation) issues can be expected to differ between OECD and non-OECD capitals. In this section we consider these hypotheses more closely, focusing on the subset of the issues that are most salient from a WTO reform perspective – those that have been the subject of submissions by WTO members and discussion in the academic literature.<sup>22</sup> We present the estimates of the models so as to shed more light on the salience of H2 – i.e. that priorities are affected by more autonomy for the Geneva missions of non-OECD countries. H2 is not rejected if there is a large difference in point estimates for delegates of non-OECD countries relative to capitals (panel 2). H3 is not rejected if officials in OECD capitals are more closely aligned on negotiation priorities than those in other capitals.

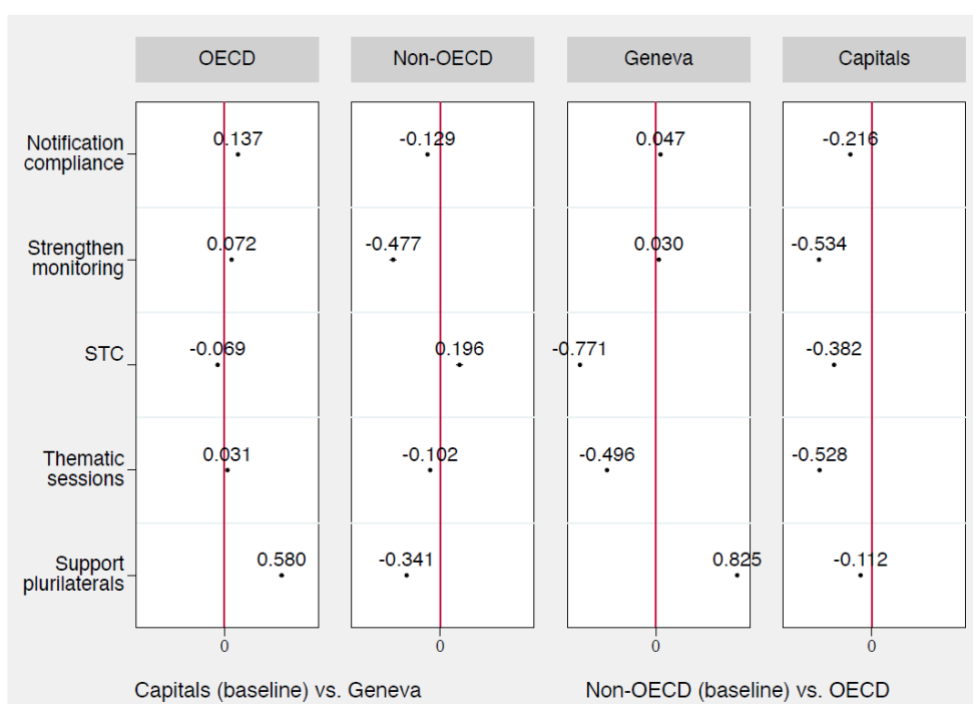
---

<sup>22</sup> See footnotes 4 and 5.

### 4.1 Fixing the machine

Transparency of actor behavior and expectations is a core requirement of international regimes. Two transparency-related issues figure prominently in WTO reform discussions. The first concerns uneven compliance with the dozens of formal notification obligations in WTO agreements. These include requirements to notify changes in trade legislation and customs clearance procedures, new technical product regulations, agricultural support programs and other subsidies. Improving notification performance has been a common objective for the EU, US and other OECD member countries (WTO, 2021c) but has been resisted by many developing countries who think the obligations already place an undue burden on them. Model estimation results in Figure 4 (third panel) show that delegates from OECD and non-OECD nations in Geneva are aligned on the priority accorded to improving policy transparency. Geneva delegations diverge from capitals (panels 1 and 2), with the signs of the estimates for the two groups differing, but the extent of divergence is relatively small. H2 is rejected for this issue as delegates from non-OECD countries are relatively closely aligned with capitals. Another dimension of improving transparency of trade policies concerns strengthening the periodic WTO trade policy monitoring reports prepared by the Secretariat that provide information on all government interventions affecting trade, beyond that available in formal notifications (WTO, 2020). Here again Geneva is aligned (Figure 4, third panel) but H2 is not rejected: delegates of non-OECD countries have strongly divergent priorities on monitoring from capitals (panel 2).

**Figure 4. Fix the Machine: Institutional matters**



Notes: Rows pertain to the following questions in Box 1: (1) Improve compliance with notification obligations; (3) Strengthening the trade policy monitoring process; (4) Use WTO bodies to defusing potential disputes (e.g., through “specific trade concern” processes); (5) Deepening engagement with stakeholders (e.g., through thematic sessions); (7) Provide support for plurilateral agreements

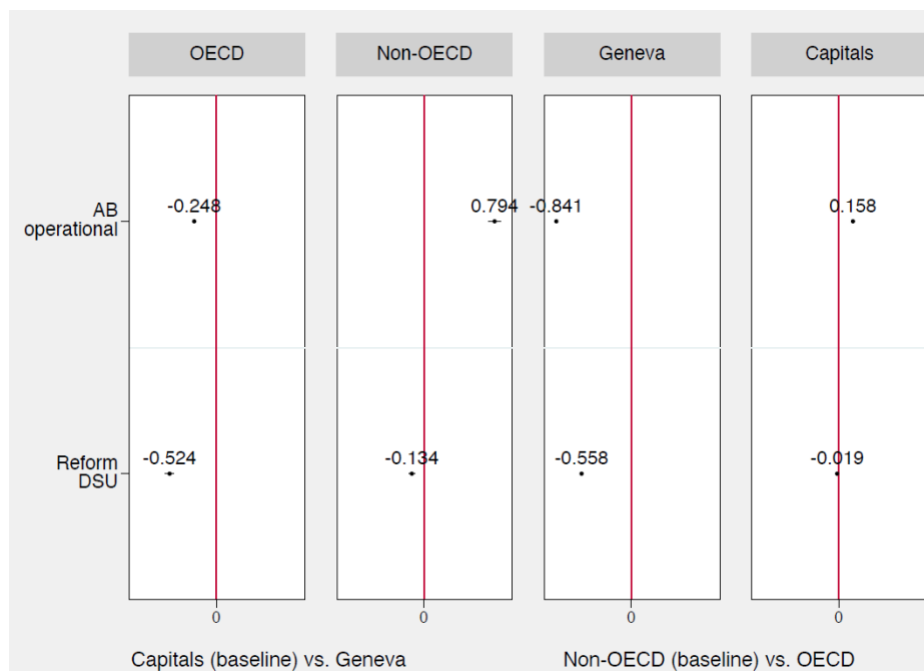
Another focal point for institutional reform concerns using WTO committees and councils to discuss emerging issues and address specific trade concerns (STCs) that fall under existing multilateral agreements. A handful of large traders make the most frequent use of STC procedures, notably the U.S. and the EU, but also some other OECD countries (Karttunen,

2020; Wolfe, 2020). A 2021 suggestion to establish common procedural guidelines by the EU and 19 other WTO members aims to make better use of WTO bodies to discuss and resolve STCs (WTO, 2021a). There has been considerable resistance to the proposal, with developing countries concerned about burdensome additional obligations (Wolfe, 2020). The third panel of Figure 4 suggests that this issue matters more for non-OECD representatives in Geneva, with officials there not aligned with capitals (panel 2), suggesting support for H2. Limitations on bureaucratic capacity may be why non-OECD delegates in Geneva accord significantly greater priority to addressing proposals to expand and improve the use of STCs than officials from OECD countries in Geneva (panel 3): given that STCs often concern technical matters, better procedures could facilitate easier engagement by authorities in capitals.

Deliberation in WTO bodies is important for officials to consider what works well under agreements, what is not working, and what should be next on the agenda. Currently the main mechanism for policy dialogue is so-called thematic sessions of WTO bodies. These are informal and permit participation by non-government stakeholders – business representatives, regulators, experts, IO staff, etc. (Wolfe 2021). On the issue whether engagement with stakeholders should be expanded through thematic sessions, H2 is rejected. Non-OECD capitals and Geneva are close to alignment. Officials of non-OECD countries in capitals and in Geneva accord a much higher priority to this than officials of OECD countries (Figure 4 panels 3 and 4). This divergence is consistent with differences in bureaucratic capacity—OECD countries may not see the need for more WTO help to engage with stakeholders.

In 2017 many WTO countries decided to move away from negotiations spanning all WTO members and the working practice of consensus decision-making by launching plurilateral talks, meaning simply talks inside the WTO among a subset of members whose eventual outcome would make use of WTO transparency and dispute settlement procedures. While the results of any such talks would need to apply on a nondiscriminatory basis because of the WTO most-favored-nation treatment rule— i.e., benefits would have to be extended to non-signatories – the shift to plurilateral talks was controversial. Many non-OECD member countries, led by India and South Africa (WTO, 2021b), argued the WTO Secretariat should not support plurilateral talks. Officials from OECD countries in Geneva differ significantly from delegates from non-OECD nations (Figure 4, panel 3). Non-OECD delegations in Geneva accord substantially less priority to this issue than capitals (Figure 4, panel 2), hence H2 is not rejected. Capitals are more aligned in the priority accorded to this subject (panel 4). This is a matter that is particularly important for the prospects for negotiating new agreements. This is the only ‘fix the machine’ issue where capitals are relatively aligned.

Independent, depoliticized third-party adjudication of trade disputes is a central feature of the WTO (Mavroidis, 2016). Resolving the Appellate Body crisis is critical for the relevance of the WTO. As already mentioned, making the Appellate Body operational again is a big issue in Geneva, while general reform of dispute settlement matters is given higher priority in capitals. Making the Appellate Body operational is the highest priority issue for non-OECD delegates in Geneva relative to capitals and to their OECD counterparts in Geneva (Figure 5, panels 2 and 3). Capital-based officials of OECD countries attach greater priority to fixing the Appellate Body, and much more priority to dispute settlement reform, than do their delegates in Geneva. H2 is not rejected: non-OECD delegates in Geneva attach much more importance to bringing back the Appellate Body than do their colleagues in capitals. The same observations apply to dispute settlement reform, with the important difference that OECD and non-OECD capitals accord this a similar priority (Panel 4). Arguably having an effective conflict resolution mechanism is of central importance to be able to address trade disputes, a matter on which OECD and non-OECD capitals agree. This is an issue on which there are large differences in perceived priorities between capitals and Geneva.

**Figure 5: Fix the machine: dispute settlement**

Note: Survey questions 9 and 10 in Box 1: Make the Appellate Body operational again; reform dispute settlement and revisit the role of appellate review.

This discussion of institutional matters confirms there is no general Geneva effect (H1): on five issues delegates from non-OECD countries diverge substantially from their OECD counterparts. Agreement on prioritization is observed only for transparency – the issues of notifications and policy monitoring. In contrast, the pattern of results provides some support for H2, consistent with an expectation that Geneva officials representing non-OECD countries would have greater autonomy than representatives of OECD nations on these institutional issues. For six of the seven fix-the-machine issues, the difference in point estimates between non-OECD Geneva delegates and non-OECD capitals is greater than 0.1. Conversely, on three of the seven issues in Figures 4 and 5, delegates representing OECD countries in Geneva are aligned with capitals (point estimate differences are less than 0.1). Priorities of OECD and non-OECD capital-based officials are aligned on only one of the institutional matters addressed: reforming the dispute settlement system. This is not surprising given the importance of an effective dispute resolution mechanism for the operation of the trading system.

#### 4.2 Priorities accorded to negotiation issues

Key negotiation-related challenges addressed in the survey questionnaire concerned addressing economic development differentials in WTO agreements, concluding active ongoing negotiations, and negotiating new rules on the use of subsidies and industrial policies.<sup>23</sup> The first is important for the prospects on engaging in substantive negotiations on policy issues as developing countries insist on the continued application of the principle of special and differential treatment (SDT), whereas OECD countries seek greater reciprocity

<sup>23</sup> Policy positions taken by countries and groups of countries on negotiation issues will reflect material interests. There is an extensive literature analyzing underlying interests and associated differences in positions taken by WTO members. Our focus in this paper is not on this question, but on the differences in priority accorded to the range of subjects included in the questionnaire by respondents.



from more advanced developing countries. A U.S. proposal (WTO, 2019) to apply criteria to determine which countries can avail themselves of SDT, in the process ensuring that China and other large emerging economies cannot do so, has met strong opposition. In practice there has long been differentiation on an issue-specific basis with large players like China engaging in reciprocity, but there are deep differences on whether WTO members should continue to be able to self-designate whether they are developing countries.<sup>24</sup> Nor surprisingly, the results shown in Figure 6 make clear that officials from OECD and non-OECD nations are far apart on the priority that should be accorded to SDT, especially in capitals. More salient, officials from non-OECD countries in Geneva and in capitals also differ significantly, suggesting H2 holds.

How to address better the needs of lower-income countries is important in permitting progress to be made on negotiations. At the time the survey was held, negotiations were ongoing on fisheries subsidies and agricultural support policies, as well on e-commerce, domestic regulation of services, investment facilitation, and measures to enhance the ability of micro and small and medium enterprises to utilize trade opportunities. The latter four negotiations took the form of “joint statement initiative” plurilateral negotiations (see e.g., Hoekman and Sabel, 2021). The fishery negotiations aim to discipline subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, and eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. Launched in 2001, the negotiations have yet to be concluded, missing the latest deadline of end-2020. There are many reasons for the failure, but SDT is a factor, including for India and China, two of the largest providers of fisheries subsidies (Tipping, 2020). Negotiations on agricultural support have a long history in the GATT/WTO, with an increasing focus on developing nations as their share of global food trade expanded (standing at 60% in 2018), in conjunction with a growing level of domestic support provided to farmers in China. This is a challenge for negotiations because the Doha Round framework did not anticipate the problem. An example is the methodology agreed in the Uruguay Round to calculate product-specific support, which includes instances where programs transfer resources at below world market prices, penalizing developing countries such as India where transfers are negative (Lu and Matthews, 2021).

Geneva delegates – both OECD and non-OECD – rank concluding the negotiations on fish subsidies and agricultural support a much higher priority than do capitals (Figure 6, panels one and two). Moreover, OECD and non-OECD delegates in Geneva are aligned on the priority to be given to these subjects. The results suggest the problem on fisheries and agricultural support is in capitals. H2 is not rejected in that delegates from non-OECD countries in Geneva are not far apart from officials in non-OECD capitals. This is an area where there appears to be more evidence of a Geneva effect (H1). We speculate that after two decades of talks representatives in Geneva may simply want to get this done, while officials in capitals may care much less about “please get this off the table” and worry more about their fishers and their farmers.

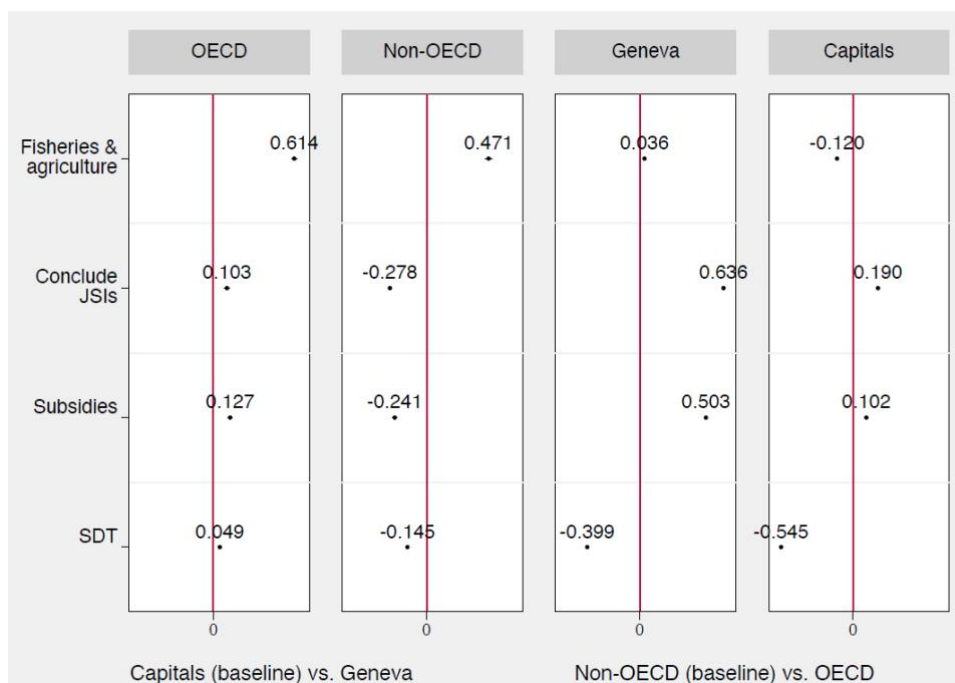
The “joint statement initiatives” (JSIs) launched at the end of 2017 that are being pursued in the WTO on a plurilateral basis have attracted a mix of OECD and non-OECD participants but have mostly attracted high- and middle-income countries. They have been contested as a matter of principle by India and South Africa (but not China, which participates in all the JSI negotiations). Officials from OECD countries in Geneva accord JSIs much more priority than non-OECD representatives based in Geneva (Figure 6, third panel), whereas the latter accord this issue less priority than officials in capitals (panel two). In conjunction with the relative alignment of views of officials of OECD countries in Geneva with capitals (panel 1), this suggests support for H2. Officials in capitals of both groups differ in the priority accorded to

---

<sup>24</sup> See Low (2021). Low argues that any solution requires separating SDT from developing country status.

this issue. While successful conclusion of these talks is widely held to be a litmus test by OECD countries for the ability of the WTO to be a platform for like-minded countries to negotiate new agreements, strong opposition by India and South Africa may help explain why capitals are not aligned on the priority to give to the JSIs.

**Figure 6 Priorities accorded to negotiation issues**



Note: Box 1 questions (12) Concluding ongoing negotiations on fisheries and agricultural support; (13) Concluding ongoing plurilateral negotiations on e-commerce, investment facilitation, regulation of services and MSMEs; (14) Negotiating stronger rules on the use of subsidies and industrial policies; and (11) Resolving differences on special and differential treatment for developing countries.

Subsidies and industrial policy of one type or another constitute the great majority of trade interventions imposed since the last financial crisis.<sup>25</sup> Subsidies can give rise to potential negative cross-border competitive spillovers. It is clear in Figure 6 that officials from OECD countries, especially in Geneva, attach a much higher priority to addressing the negative international spillovers of industrial subsidies than non-OECD officials, and a somewhat higher priority than their own capitals. Non-OECD officials in capitals attach much more importance to this issue than their representatives in Geneva, supporting H2. OECD and non-OECD officials in capitals are close to aligned on the priority accorded to addressing this issue.

The analysis of the negotiation issues considered in the survey suggest that overall H2 is not rejected: Geneva delegates from non-OECD countries diverge from capitals in the priority they attach to all four subjects, while Geneva-based officials from OECD countries are aligned with capitals on two of the four issues. The model estimates reveal that officials in OECD capitals have significantly different priorities than officials in non-OECD capitals on all four issues.

The question of interest for H3 is whether priorities of OECD capital-based officials are more aligned than those of non-OECD officials in capitals. Table 1 reports the variance in priorities accorded to each of the issues by officials in capitals of OECD countries and in non-OECD

<sup>25</sup> See [https://www.globaltradealert.org/global\\_dynamics](https://www.globaltradealert.org/global_dynamics).

capitals. Columns 1 and 2 show that there is much more heterogeneity in the priorities of non-OECD capital-based officials than pertains for officials in OECD capitals, consistent with H3. This variance is not uniform, however – on some issues officials from both sets of countries reveal significant variance in priorities accorded to an issue – e.g., strengthening policy monitoring, and reforming the dispute settlement process. On expanding disciplines for industrial subsidies, there is heterogeneity in the priority attached to this issue among both OECD capitals and non-OECD capitals. Perhaps WTO members simply do not have enough information to develop a common understanding of where new rules are needed (Hoekman and Nelson, 2020). On three issues (providing support for plurilateral initiatives; concluding the JSI plurilateral negotiations and concluding the negotiations on fishery subsidies and agricultural support) the difference in the variance observed for the two groups of respondents is statistically different at the 1% level or less. The differences are not statistically significant for other issues. These results indicate that OECD officials in capitals are generally more aligned than officials in non-OECD capitals, and that this is the case in particular for matters pertaining to ongoing WTO negotiations.

**Table 1. Variance in priority accorded to issues by officials in OECD and non-OECD capitals**

| Issue  | $\sigma^2$ non-OECD | $\sigma^2$ OECD | Levene p-value for difference in $\sigma^2$ |
|--|---------------------|-----------------|---|
| <b>1. Fix the machine:</b>                   |                     |                 |   |
| <b><i>Working practices</i></b>              |                     |                 |   |
| Improve notification compliance              | 13.14               | 0.95            | 0.094                                       |
| Strengthen monitoring                        | 13.14               | 12.78           | 0.926                                       |
| Use committees to address STCs               | 13.10               | 0.87            | 0.102                                       |
| More thematic Committee sessions             | 13.11               | 0.90            | 0.103                                       |
| Provide support for plurilateral initiatives | 22.28               | 0.94            | <b>0.001</b>                                |
| <b><i>Dispute settlement</i></b>             |                     |                 |   |
| Make the AB operational                      | 0.91                | 0.90            | 0.925                                       |
| Reform dispute settlement process (DSU)      | 18.43               | 12.85           | 0.242                                       |
| <b>2. Negotiation issues</b>                 |                     |                 |   |
| Fisheries & agriculture                      | 18.11               | 1.01            | <b>0.010</b>                                |
| Conclude ongoing plurilateral talks (JSIs)   | 21.98               | 0.96            | <b>0.001</b>                                |
| Expanding rules for industrial subsidies     | 12.92               | 12.73           | 0.963                                       |
| Revisit special and differential treatment   | 13.16               | 1.11            | 0.112                                       |
| Average number of responses                  | 62                  | 65              |   |

Notes: STCs: specific trade concerns; DSU: WTO Dispute Settlement Understanding; SDT: JSIs: Joint Statement Initiatives.

## 5. Conclusion

Where trade officials stand appears to be influenced in part by where they sit, as Miles' Law predicts: there are significant differences between Geneva and capitals in the priority accorded to addressing WTO issues. But on many issues delegates in Geneva representing OECD and non-OECD countries are also not on the same page. Insofar as there is a Geneva effect, it appears to be issue specific. We find support for the hypothesis that where Geneva stands is influenced by bureaucratic capacity at home, which is associated with greater autonomy for

Geneva officials representing non-OECD countries and may help explain the greater differences in perceived priorities with capitals than is observed for officials from OECD countries. There is more alignment in views for OECD countries, consistent with the presumption that OECD countries have greater bureaucratic capacity and the possibility that officials from OECD member countries interact more frequently via the work they engage in at the OECD. We also find support for the hypothesis that capital-based officials of OECD countries accord similar priority to negotiation issues as opposed to ‘fix the machine’ issues.

That we find large differences between officials from OECD and non-OECD countries on both institutional and negotiating issues is not at all surprising given the failure of much of the Doha Round talks and the demise of the Appellate Body. But deadlock in the daily life of the WTO may not be solely a matter of differences in material interests and national objectives, important as they are. We have no data on outcomes, but some of the gaps we observe may well be part of an explanation for why some issues seem blocked in Geneva. The contribution of our analysis is to shed new light on a potentially important source of difficulty in international cooperation. The prospects of agreement may be affected not only by well-understood differences between states that reflect material interests and domestic political economy drivers, but by differences within states regarding relative priorities. The results show divides both *internal* to subsets of WTO members, and *across* the membership, suggesting that sometimes Ambassadors in Geneva may be an obstacle to progress, at other times the problem is in capitals.<sup>26</sup> Generating information that elucidates where – and how intensely – Geneva differs from capitals would help the organization determine when to bring capitals to Geneva and which issues to prioritize.<sup>27</sup>

Our findings suggest that analyses of international cooperation in IOs, their performance and prospects for responding to changes in circumstances (reform) should consider the possibility that representatives of states accredited to an IO may have different priorities (preferences) than their colleagues in capitals. Whether such differences have consequences in affecting behavior is of course an important question. We make no claim to this effect in this paper given the survey data reflect only the rank ordering of priorities by respondents. Even if in practice such differences do not affect behavior and positions taken – which we regard as unlikely to be the case in those instances where representatives have substantial autonomy – the fact that views on priorities sometimes differ quite substantially suggests a need for further research into this possibility, its determinants, and its repercussions.

The member-driven nature of the operation of the organization means that the principals (the member states) do not permit the Secretariat to exercise much agency. Alternative conceptualizations such as Elsig’s (2010, 2011) argument that member state representatives and the Secretariat form a ‘complex agent’, while helping to better characterize the operation of the WTO, do not capture the extent to which Geneva representatives and capitals may have different priorities. Member states of the WTO – and by extension, potentially similar IOs where members are largely in the driving seat – should not be seen as the unitary actors that they are generally presumed to be. Bureaucratic politics in the sense used here may explain some difficulties in international cooperation.

---

<sup>26</sup> The survey design does not allow us to assess potential reasons for differences in priorities within Geneva and between capitals, or within capitals, e.g., if this is associated with the ministries our respondents represent.

<sup>27</sup> In such cases, forcing ministers to come to Geneva to talk to each other may make a difference. In 1993 Peter Sutherland, the first Director-General of the GATT threatened Geneva ambassadors that he would telephone their capitals if they did not make greater concessions to bring the Uruguay Round to a conclusion, and he did (Odell, 2005, 442-3). Two successors, Renato Ruggiero and Mike Moore, made similar threats (Elsig, 2011, 509).

In addition to highlighting the possibility that the frequent presumption in the IR literature that delegates reflect the views of their governments may not hold, our research has several important implications for future research. First, since the priorities accorded by officials to a given issue may depend on where they sit, in Geneva or in capitals, understanding to what extent this is the case and why could help to determine the prospects for agreement on issues and what governments – and the Secretariat – could do to provide information that could help bridge differences. Second, our data do not permit analysis of factors such as participation in coalitions, the extent to which Geneva missions have been granted formal autonomy to deal with certain types of issues, and the extent to which such discretion is ‘captured’ by NGOs or influenced by analysis and activities of IOs other than the WTO. Such research requires survey instruments that are designed to generate information that is pertinent to investigating such questions. The survey that is the basis for this paper illustrates that collecting such data is feasible.

Third, future research to explore if where officials stand depends not only on where they sit but on where they have been and where they are going (Schneider, 1993) would be valuable. Some officials in some countries will be oriented to advancing in the government hierarchy; others may have their eye on moving to the private sector, and those preferences may well influence where they stand as much or more than where they sit, for now. Many senior officials in the Secretariat first came to Geneva as delegates. The prospect of future employment in the Secretariat may have some influence on their views and rhetoric while being national representatives (Gray and Baturo, 2021). Here again appropriate survey design that includes questions of education, gender, professional experience, and career path can shed light on these potential determinants of positions taken by representatives. A final policy implication of our work is that greater effort – perhaps by the WTO Secretariat – to undertake the type of survey we have analyzed on an annual basis with follow up to ensure a high response rate to better understand the views of WTO members would help to identify areas on which to focus. We expect that many IOs could profitably conduct this sort of analysis.

## References

- Allison, G. 1971. Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.
- Bauer, M. and J. Ege. 2017. A Matter of Will and Action: The Bureaucratic Autonomy of International Public Administration. in M. Bauer et al. (eds.), International Bureaucracy: Challenges and Lessons for Public Administration Research (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 13-41.
- Bertelsmann Stiftung. 2018. Revitalizing Multilateral Governance at the World Trade Organization. Report of the High-Level Board of Experts on the Future of Global Trade Governance. At: [https://www.wto.org/english/news\\_e/news18\\_e/bertelsmann\\_rpt\\_e.pdf](https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news18_e/bertelsmann_rpt_e.pdf)
- Brutger, R. and B. Rathbun. 2021. Fair Share? Equality and Equity in American Attitudes toward Trade,' International Organization 75(3): 880-900.
- Burstein, P. 2021. Testing Theories About Advocacy and Public Policy, Perspectives on Politics 19(1): 148-59.
- Cortell, A. and S Peterson. 2006. Dutiful agents, rogue actors, or both? Staffing, voting rules, and slack in the WHO and WTO, in D. Hawkins, D. Lake, D. Nielson and M. Tierney (eds.), Delegation and Agency in International Organizations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deere-Birkbeck, C. and C. Monagle. 2009. Strengthening Multilateralism: A Mapping of Selected Proposals on WTO Reform. ICTSD and University of Oxford.
- Eagleton-Pierce, M. 2011. The Competing Kings of Cotton: (Re)Framing the WTO African Cotton Initiative, New Political Economy 17(3): 313-37.
- Ege, J. and M. Bauer. 2017. How Financial Resources Affect the Autonomy of International Public Administrations, Global Policy 8: 75-84.
- Ege, J., Bauer, M. W., Bayerlein, L., Eckhard, S., & Knill, C. (2021). Avoiding disciplinary garbage cans: a pledge for a problem-driven approach to researching international public administration. Journal of European Public Policy, 1-13.
- Elsig, M. 2010. The World Trade Organization at Work: Performance in a Member-Driven Milieu, The Review of International Organizations 5(3): 345-63.
- Elsig, M. 2011. Principal-Agent Theory and the World Trade Organization: Complex Agency and Missing Delegation, European Journal of International Relations 17(3): 495-517.
- Elsig, M. and P. Stucki. 2012. Low-Income Developing Countries and WTO Litigation: Why Wake up the Sleeping Dog?. Review of International Political Economy 19(2): 292-316.
- Elsig, M. and C. Dupont. 2012. Persistent Deadlock in Multilateral Trade Negotiations: The Case of Doha, in A. Narlikar, M. Daunton and R. Stern (eds.) The Oxford Handbook on the World Trade Organization, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 587–606.
- Elsig, M. and K. Milewicz. 2017. The Politics of Treaty Signature: The Role of Diplomats and Ties That Bind. International Negotiation 22(3): 521-43.
- Elsig, M., B. Hoekman and J. Pauwelyn (Eds.). 2017. Assessing the World Trade Organization: Fit for Purpose? Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- European Commission. 2021. Reforming the WTO: Towards a Sustainable and Effective Multilateral Trading System, European Commission, COM(2021) 66 final ANNEX, February 2.

- Evenett, S. and R. Baldwin (Eds.). 2020. Revitalising Multilateralism: Pragmatic Ideas for the New WTO Director-General. London: CEPR Press
- Fiorini, M., B. Hoekman, P. C. Mavroidis, D. Nelson and R. Wolfe. 2021. Stakeholder Preferences and Priorities for the Next WTO Director General, Global Policy 12(S3): 13-22.
- Fitzgerald, O. (ed.), 2020, Modernizing the World Trade Organization. Waterloo: CIGI.
- Fleischer, J. and N. Reiners. 2021. Connecting International Relations and Public Administration: Toward a Joint Research Agenda for the Study of International Bureaucracy, International Studies Review. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa097>
- Gray, J. and J. Slapin. 2012. How Effective Are Preferential Trade Agreements? Ask the Experts, The Review of International Organizations 7(3): 309-33.
- Gray, J. and A. Baturo. 2021. Delegating Diplomacy: Rhetoric across Agents in the United Nations General Assembly, International Review of Administrative Sciences. At: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852321997560>.
- Greenhill, B. 2015. Transmitting Rights: International Organizations and the Diffusion of Human Rights Practices. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hannah, E., J. Scott and R. Wilkinson. 2018. The WTO in Buenos Aires: The Outcome and Its Significance for the Future of the Multilateral Trading System, World Economy 41(10): 2578-98.
- Hawkins, D., D. Lake, D. Nielson and M. Tierney (eds.). 2006. Delegation and Agency in International Organizations Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heldt, E. 2017. Regaining Control of Errant Agents? Agency Slack at the European Commission and the World Health Organization, Cooperation and Conflict 52(4): 469-84.
- Heldt, E. and H. Schmidtke. 2017. Measuring the Empowerment of International Organizations: The Evolution of Financial and Staff Capabilities, Global Policy 8: 51-61.
- Herold, J., A. Liese, P-O. Busch and H. Feil. 2021. Why National Ministries Consider the Policy Advice of International Bureaucracies: Survey Evidence from 106 Countries,' International Studies Quarterly 65(3): 669-82.
- Hoekman, B. 2012. Proposals for WTO Reform: A Synthesis and Assessment. In A. Narlikar, M. Daunton and R. Stern (eds.) The Oxford Handbook on the World Trade Organization, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hoekman, B. and M. Kosteckii. 2009. The Political Economy of the World Trading System. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hoekman, Bernard and Douglas Nelson, (2020) 'Rethinking International Subsidy Rules,' The World Economy 43:12 3104-32.
- Hoekman, B. and C. Sabel. 2021. 'Plurilateral Cooperation as an Alternative to Trade Agreements: Innovating One Domain at a Time,' Global Policy 12(S3): 49-60.
- Hoekman, B, Tu Xinquan and Wang Dong (eds.) Rebooting Multilateral Trade Cooperation: Perspectives from China and Europe, London: CEPR Press.
- Hooghe, L., T. Lenz and G. Marks. 2019. A theory of international organization. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ismail, F. 2009. Reforming the World Trade Organization, World Economics, 10(4): 109-46.
- Ismail, F. 2020. WTO reform and the crisis of multilateralism: A Developing Country Perspective. Geneva: South Centre.

- Jinnah, S. 2010. Overlap Management in the World Trade Organization: Secretariat Influence on Trade-Environment Politics, Global Environmental Politics 10:2 54-79.
- Johnston, A. 2001. Treating International Institutions as Social Environments, International Studies Quarterly 45(4): 487-515.
- Jones, C. 2017. Bureaucratic Politics and Organizational Process Models, Oxford Research Encyclopedia, International Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press),
- Karns, M. and K. Mingst. 2013. International Organizations and Diplomacy, in A. Cooper et al., (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Karttunen, M. 2020. Transparency in the WTO SPS and TBT Agreements: The Real Jewel in the Crown. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Knill, C., L. Bayerlein, J. Enkler and S. Grohs. 2019. Bureaucratic influence and administrative styles in international organizations. The Review of International Organizations 14, 83–106
- Lawrence, R. 2006. "Rulemaking Amidst Growing Diversity: A 'club of clubs' approach to WTO reform and new issue selection," Journal of International Economic Law, 9(4): 823-85
- Lewis, J. 2005. The Janus Face of Brussels: Socialization and Everyday Decision Making in the European Union. International Organization 59(4): 937-71.
- Liese, A., J. Herold, H. Feil and P. Busch. 2021. The Heart of Bureaucratic Power: Explaining International Bureaucracies Expert Authority, Review of International Studies 47(3): 353-76.
- Low, P. 2021. Special and Differential Treatment and Developing Country Status: Can the Two Be Separated?, in B. Hoekman, X. Tu and D. Wang (eds.), Rebooting Multilateral Trade Cooperation: Perspectives from China and Europe. London: CEPR.
- Lu, X. and A. Matthews. 2021. Is it Possible to Promote an Agricultural Agenda in the WTO? in B. Hoekman, X. Tu and D. Wang (eds.), Rebooting Multilateral Trade Cooperation: Perspectives from China and Europe. London: CEPR.
- Mavroidis, P.C. 2016. The Regulation of International Trade, vols 1 & 2. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Mattingly, G. Renaissance Diplomacy. London: Jonathan Cape, 1962
- Miles, R. 1978. The Origin and Meaning of Miles Law, Public Administration Review 38(5): 399-403.
- Murdoch, Z., H. Kassim, S. Connolly and B. Geys. 2019. Do International Institutions Matter? Socialization and International Bureaucrats, European Journal of International Relations 25(3): 852-77.
- Nelson, S. and C. Weaver. 2016. Organizational Culture, in J. Cogan et al. (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of International Organizations. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 920-39.
- Odell, J. 2005. Chairing a WTO Negotiation, Journal of International Economic Law 8(2): 425-48.
- Odell, J. and S. Sell. 2006. Reframing the Issue: The Coalition on Intellectual Property and Public Health in the WTO, 2001, in J.S. Odell (ed.) Negotiating Trade: Developing Countries in the WTO and NAFTA. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ostry, S. 2006. The world trading system: In the fog of uncertainty, The Review of International Organizations, 1(1): 139–152.



- Panke, D., G. Polat and F. Hohlstein. 2021. Satisfied or Not? Exploring the Interplay of Individual, Country and International Organization Characteristics for Negotiation Success, The Review of International Organizations 16(2): 403-29.
- Pouliot, V. 2016. International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Schneider, B. 1993. The Career Connection: A Comparative Analysis of Bureaucratic Preferences and Insulation, Comparative Politics 25(3): 31-50.
- Steger, D. (Ed.). 2010. Redesigning the World Trade Organization for the Twenty-First Century. Wilfred Laurier University Press.
- Sutherland, P. et al. 2004. The Future of the WTO: Addressing Institutional Challenges in the New Millennium, Report by the Consultative Board to the Director-General. Geneva: WTO.
- Tipping, A. 2020. Addressing the Development Dimension of an Overcapacity and Overfishing Subsidy Discipline in the WTO Fisheries Subsidies Negotiations, IISD working paper, January.
- Trommer, S. 2014. Transformations in Trade Politics: Participatory Trade Politics in West Africa. London: Routledge.
- Tu, X. and R. Wolfe. 2021. Reviving the negotiation function of the WTO: Why the onus falls on the three major powers In Hoekman, Tu and Wang (eds.).
- VanGrasstek, C. 2021. The Trade Policy of the United States Under the Trump Administration, in B. Hoekman and E. Zedillo (eds.) Trade Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Back to the Past? Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Warwick Commission. 2007. The Multilateral Trade Regime: Which Way Forward? Coventry: University of Warwick.
- Wolfe, R. 2009. The special safeguard fiasco in the WTO: the perils of inadequate analysis and negotiation, World Trade Review, 8(4): 517-44.
- Wolfe, R. 2020. Reforming WTO Conflict Management: Why and How to Improve the Use of Specific Trade Concerns, Journal of International Economic Law 23(4): 817-39.
- Wolfe, R. 2021. Informal Learning and WTO Renewal: Using Thematic Sessions to Create More Opportunities for Dialogue, Global Policy, 12(S3): 30-40.
- Wolff, A. 2021. The World Economic Order – Building the WTO Back Better, remarks at American University, July 2, 2021.
- Wonka, A. and B. Rittberger. 2010. Credibility, Complexity and Uncertainty: Explaining the Institutional Independence of 29 EU Agencies, West European Politics 33(4): 730-52.
- WTO. 2018. Strengthening the Deliberative Function of the WTO, Discussion Paper (Communication from Canada). JOB/GC/211. 14 December.
- WTO. 2019a. China's Proposal on WTO Reform, General Council, Communication from China WT/GC/W/773, 13 May.
- WTO. 2019b. Draft General Council Decision: Procedures to Strengthen the Negotiating Function of the WTO, Communication from the United States, WT/GC/W/764/Rev.1, 25 November.
- WTO. 2019c. An Undifferentiated WTO: Self-Declared Development Status Risks Institutional Irrelevance (Communication from the United States). WT/GC/W/757/REV.1. 14 February.

- WTO. 2020. Overview of Developments in the International Trading Environment: Annual Report by the Director-General (Mid-October 2019 to Mid-October 2020), WT/TPR/OV/23, 30 November.
- WTO. 2021a. Procedural Guidelines for WTO Councils and Committees Addressing Trade Concerns: Draft General Council Decision. WT/GC/W/777/Rev.6, 15 July.
- WTO. 2021b. The Legal Status of Joint Statement Initiatives and Their Negotiated Outcomes, General Council, communication from India and South Africa, WT/GC/W/819, 19 February.
- WTO. 2021c. Procedures to Enhance Transparency and Strengthen Notification Requirements under WTO Agreements. JOB/GC/204/Rev.6, JOB/CTG/14/Rev.6, 15 July.

Appendix 1

Figure 1. NGO priorities vs. non-OECD delegations

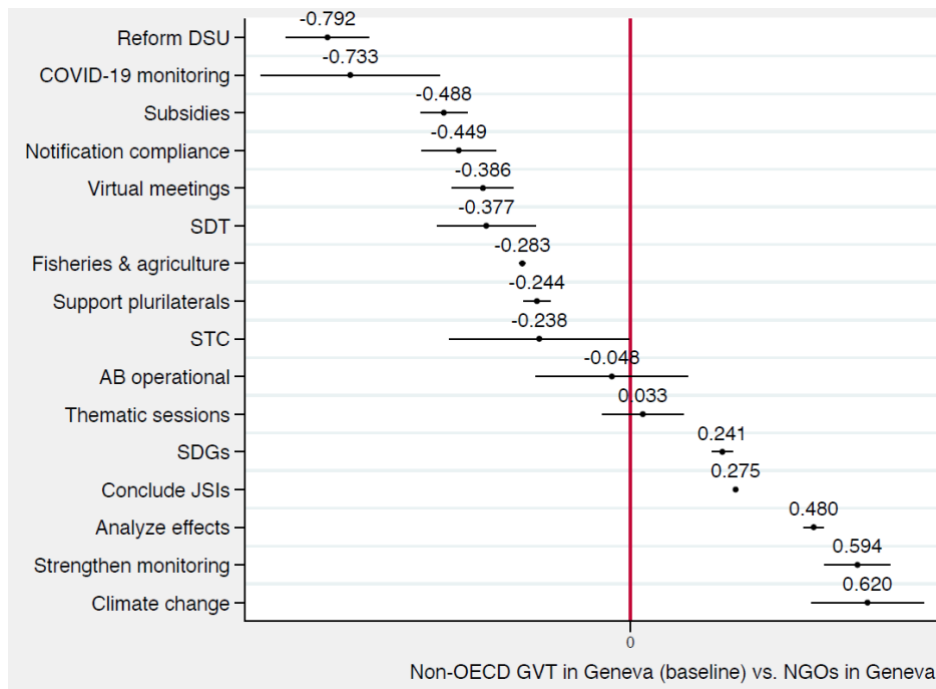
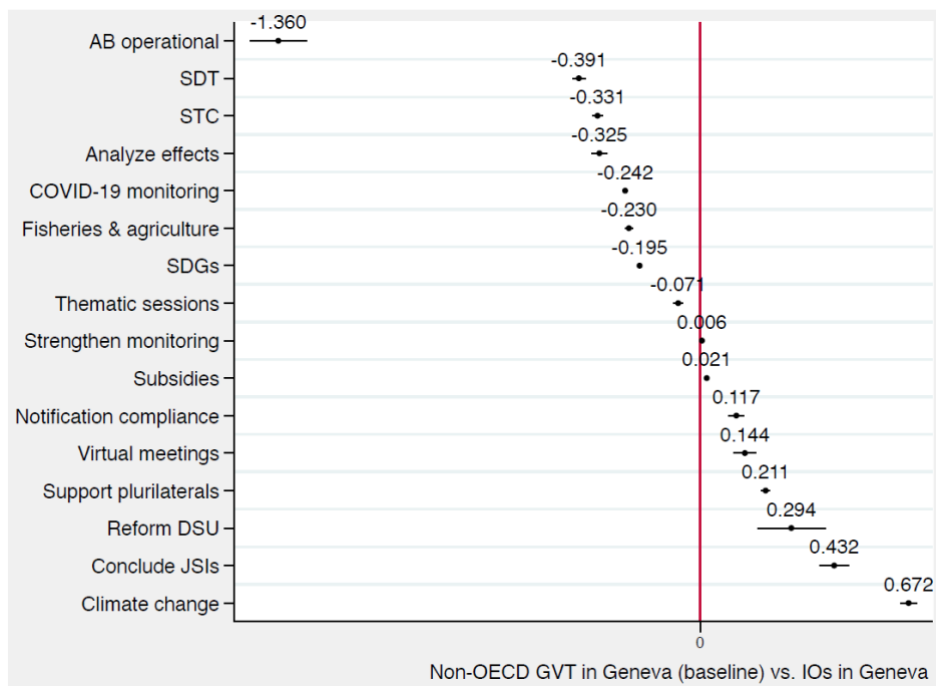


Figure 2. International organization staff views vs. non-OECD delegations



**Author contacts:**

**Bernard Hoekman**

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute  
Villa Schifanoia, Via Boccaccio 121, 50133 Florence Italy

CEPR, London

Email: [bernard.hoekman@eui.eu](mailto:bernard.hoekman@eui.eu)

**Robert Wolfe**

School of Policy Studies, Queen's University  
138, Union Street, Suite 301  
Kingston, Ontario, Canada K7L 3N6

Email: [robert.wolfe@queensu.ca](mailto:robert.wolfe@queensu.ca)

