

Explaining Regime Effectiveness

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Many of the major policy challenges facing governments today are in some sense collective problems calling for joint solutions. Effective co-operation can, however, be hard to establish and maintain. It therefore becomes important to understand why some efforts at developing and implementing co-operative solutions ‘succeed’ while others ‘fail’. Our group was convened to address exactly that question.

Before we can start searching for an answer, we have to define more precisely what we mean by ‘success’ and ‘failure’ in this context.¹ We adopted the conventional solution, which is to define success in terms of *effectiveness*. In a common sense understanding, an international regime - i.e. a set of rules and norms designed to govern a particular system of activities - is effective to the extent that it performs a particular function or solves the problem it was established to solve. Although useful as a point of departure, it soon becomes clear that this definition is not sufficiently precise to serve as a useful tool for systematic comparative research. What we need is a precise and generally applicable standard of measurement that, firstly, defines a point or trajectory against which actual performance can be compared, and, secondly, provides a common metric that can be applied across a wide range of cases. In this article I shall have to confine myself to a few words about the former aspect.

The actual performance of a regime can be compared against two points of reference. One is the hypothetical state of affairs that would have come about had the regime not existed. This is clearly the standard we have in mind when arguing that ‘regimes matter’. The alternative option is to evaluate the actual state of affairs against some idea of what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘optimal’ solution. This is the appropriate standard if we want to know whether or to what extent a problem is in fact ‘solved’ under present arrangements. These two standards can easily be combined, as suggested by Helm and Sprinz (1999). Their formula (below) measures the effectiveness of a regime in terms of the extent to which it *in fact* accomplishes all that *can be* accomplished.

$$\frac{\text{Actual regime solution} - \text{No-regime counterfactual}}{\text{Collective optimum} - \text{No-regime counterfactual}}$$

By this logic, we would consider regime X as more effective than regime Y to the extent that it succeeds in tapping more of the joint gain *potential*. For comparative research, such a standardised notion of *relative* effectiveness is particularly attractive in that it helps solve the common metric problem. But any attempt at measuring regime effectiveness involves causal inference, requiring that we separate changes that can be attributed to the existence and operation of the regime itself from those that have been brought about by other factors. This is by no means a trivial exercise.

How, then, can we *explain* variance in regime effectiveness? Previous research has searched for answers along two main paths. One leads us to examine the character of the problem itself: some problems are intellectually less complicated or politically more benign than others and hence are easier to solve. This leaves us with the challenge of specifying what distinguishes benign problems from those that are more malign and determining the impact of malignancy. The other path focuses on the elusive notion of problem-solving capacity, the basic argument being that some systems or institutions have greater capacity than others to solve particular kinds of problems. The challenge here is to specify what distinguishes high-capacity systems

or institutions from those that have low capacity, and to determine how much of the variance in outcomes can be attributed to these properties.

These are not mutually independent explanations. Beyond a fairly high level of generality, what constitutes capacity can be determined only with reference to a certain category of problems and tasks. Thus, it is by now conventional wisdom that the skills and institutional tools required to solve malign problems are in part different from those required to solve problems that are basically benign in character. For example, control over the system of activities to be regulated (in technical terms, 'basic game power') is more important in the former setting than in the latter.

The most comprehensive empirical study examining the merits of the two paths of explanation that has been published so far was finished at the Centre (see Miles et al., 2002). At least some of its conclusions must be considered good news to those who are working to establish co-operative solutions. Although optimal solutions seem to be very rare, most regimes do make a significant difference. Particularly encouraging is the fact that we find a fair amount of success in dealing also with malign problems. Both uncertainty and political malignancy can - up to a point - be overcome. The combination of high uncertainty and strong malignancy can, though, be lethal. Capacity seems to account for as much of the variance observed in outcomes as type of problem. Organisational capacity to integrate and aggregate actor preferences - expressed in decision rules and active roles for secretariats and chairs - makes a significant difference in dealing with (moderately) malign as well as benign problems. Informal entrepreneurial leadership by delegates or delegations is an important supplement to - and sometimes a substitute for - organisational capacity. However, when the going gets tough, power seems to be the ultimate tool. In dealing with strongly malign problems, basic game power accounts - at least in our study - for more of the variance in outcomes than any other single factor. There is an interesting flip side of the coin, though: in dealing with benign and mixed problems, basic game power seems to be largely ineffective or even counterproductive. There is clearly no simple cure-all treatment.

Note:

¹ For an attempt at developing a framework for a more comprehensive analysis of regime consequences, see Underdal & Young (forthcoming)

References:

Miles, E. L., A. Underdal, S. Andresen, J. Wettestad, J. B. Skjærseth, and E. M. Carlin (2002). *Environmental Regime Effectiveness: Confronting Theory with Evidence*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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