



# The spread of informal governance practices in G-summitry

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Accepted: 1 February 2022 / Published online: 11 March 2022  
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## Abstract

This article examines the spread of informal practices from the G7 to the G20, analysing the implications of the G20's adoption of six practices that have marked the G7 as a quintessential informal governance group. Drawing on archival documents, elite interviews, and embedded participant observation, the argument is made that the practices that are strengths of the G7 are liabilities for the G20. Key practices that have been central to the G7's success do not entail success in G20. Furthermore, the practices that transpose well into the G20 context are those that have less to do with the way the members relate to one another within the club and more to do with how its members are positioned within the international system overall. These findings add complexity to the proposition that informal governance institutions like the G20 can serve as effective means to channel rising states' status concerns.

**Keywords** Practice Theory · Conspicuous Governance · Exclusive Multilateralism · G7 · G20

The founding of the G20 in response to financial crises in the 1990s and its subsequent elevation to the leaders' level in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis can be seen as a move towards more equitable representation in informal multilateralism, eventually supplanting the G7 as the top table of global economic governance. The G20 was designed with greater regional and cultural diversity, correcting for the G7's profound legitimacy deficit. While its composition reflects the need for greater equity and diversity in international society's top ranks, its procedural form remains largely unchanged, adopting the G7's *modus operandi* as an informal club. What follows analyses the implications of the G20's adoption of practices that have marked the G7 out as a quintessential informal governance group and that have been central to its enduring position in the overall global governance architecture.

Informality has been critical to the successful operation and institutional longevity of the G7; as such, it is intuitive that those looking to replicate such achievement

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would look to the G7 as the template to emulate. In equating the G7's success with its endurance I sidestep debates over whether it yields substantive outcomes or is merely a vanity talk-shop (Eccleston et al. 2015; Rachman 2010; Slaughter 2017; Wolverson 2010). As is outlined below, a practice-oriented approach takes the repeated performance of the summit as an end in itself. Regardless of whether G-summitry remains—or even ever was—useful, it successfully persists as a central governance practice. The aim here is to evaluate whether the constituent practices, which in the aggregate form the overall practice of G-summitry, serve the same goal of effective performative governance in the G20 as they do in the G7 (Adler and Pouliot 2011, p. 8). Indeed, even if one takes the G7 to be an outdated club of waning powers, the group's continued centrality in the governance landscape lends credence to equating the continued annual performance of the practice of summitry as success. Despite significant changes in the overall international political and economic pecking order since the club's founding that might justify its marginalisation or outright mothballing, it endures.

While it might appear as a suitable model to copy, I argue that the very practices that are strengths of the G7 are liabilities for the G20 as a larger, more culturally and regionally diverse group. That which typifies the G7 has spread to become hallmark features of a more inclusive, representative contemporary governance group, but what has driven the G7 as a relatively homogenous, Western club does not scale particularly well to the global level. Practices of informality have spread from one club to the other, but that does not entail that success necessarily follows. Indeed, the very practices that render the G7 an archetypical example of informal governance could very well be the undoing of the G20. Moreover, I argue that the practices that transpose well into the G20 context are those that have less to do with the way the members relate to one another within the club and more to do with how its members are positioned within the international system overall. As is discussed in the conclusion, this adds complexity to the proposition that informal governance institutions like the G20 can serve as effective means to channel rising states' status concerns and thereby dampen the likelihood of geopolitical contestation (Welch Larson and Shevchenko 2014, p. 34; Paul et al. 2014; Pouliot 2014). What follows adds specification to the status literature's understanding of whether governance institutions can mitigate conflict stemming from status anxieties— their existence alone is insufficient, they need to work in practice—indeed, as practices—if they are to dampen status concerns.

I proceed by analysing six hallmark practices of the G7 that have been imported into the G20: (1) intimate engagement, (2) informality, (3) consensus decision making, (4) outreach engagement, (5) conspicuous governance, and (6) exclusive multilateralism, in order to assess how they function in each of the clubs. Empirically, I focus particularly on the early years of the G7 and G20, examining when, how, and why particular practices were baked into the constitution of each club, subsequently assessing the success of any particular practice in each group. By practices, I follow Adler and Pouliot (2011) in understanding practices as 'socially meaningful patterns of action' performed by 'competent' actors in such a way as to embody, enact, and reify the world and the meanings ascribed to the world and the things within it (Adler and Pouliot 2011, pp. 4–7). This strain of practice theory has proved fruitful



in analysing G-summitry. Not only do Adler and Pouliot use the then-G8 as their prototypical example to illustrate their core definition of what a practice is, who performs them, and how the work (Adler and Pouliot 2011, pp. 7–8), but key global governance scholarship has subsequently used this lens to analyse the G20 (Cooper and Pouliot 2015; Slaughter 2020). That practices are performances observed by an appraising audience renders such an approach, especially apt for analysing ‘conspicuous governance’, which fundamentally concerns the act of being *seen* to govern, rather than the substantive act of governing itself.

Most immediately, this analysis responds to a straightforward evaluative question about what works—and what does not—in G-summitry, coupled with an analytical question inviting consideration over why things work in one club but not the other. Overall, I find that the practices of conspicuous governance and exclusive multilateralism transpose from the G7 to the G20 quite well, while the other practices of the G7 are more problematic in the G20 context. This feeds into a broader question about what this tells us about global governance today—what does it mean if certain dimensions of the G7 work in the G20 but not others?

## Intimate engagement

In 1975 French President Valéry Giscard hosted the first summit that would evolve into the G7, welcoming the leaders of the USA, UK, Japan, West Germany, and Italy to Chateau Ramouillet (Canada would not be added to the club until the following year). That first meeting set the foundations that would typify G-summitry thereafter and it was of prime importance to Giscard that it be an intimate gathering, ideally with the leaders alone meeting without their usual entourages (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office 1975).

Giscard used another informal club, what was colloquially known as ‘The Library Group’, as his template for the summit. Before assuming the Presidency, Giscard had been Finance Minister and was actively involved in IMF reform during the early-1970s as the institution tried to confront the multiple financial shocks at the time, as well as its own institutional shortcomings, which were made all the more apparent by upheaval in the financial system. To overcome deadlock at the IMF, the American Treasury Secretary, George Shultz, met privately in advance of meetings with allied finance ministers from the UK, France, Japan, and West Germany to share with them what he would say in the meeting, ensure alignment, and set a plan for how to overcome any potential impasses (Naylor 2019; Shultz 2012). It was a gambit that worked sufficiently well such that it became a routine practice and the ministers began informally meeting together as a group in advance of the larger IMF meetings. It was when they did so in the library of the White House at the invitation of Nixon that they adopted their moniker (Naylor 2019; Shultz 2012).

The Library Group is significant for three reasons. First, it was an informal means to overcome stumbling blocks at the formal IMF. Second, it was kept as a secret so as to prevent objection or meddling by all those excluded from it, as well as prevent petitions to join the group. Third, its three key members were Shultz, Giscard, and their West German counterpart—and, future Chancellor—Helmut Schmidt. It



was this particular mix that would become the magic formula to get the G7 off the ground. The Library Group served as evidence to its members that such an informal grouping could produce results which formal institutional arrangements could not. It also demonstrated that keeping the group small and close-knit was key to its success. The close relationships formed in the group, particularly amongst Shultz, Giscard, and Schmidt, solidified the trust and rapport amongst these three individuals such that when the idea of the Rambouillet summit would later mooted, after Giscard and Schmidt has been elevated to their pinnacles of their respective political hierarchies, support for the initiative came from the highest levels. Moreover, and just as significantly, their close camaraderie set the tone for the group- interacting informally as friends, rather than formally as statespersons (Shultz 2012).

As the Rambouillet summit was coming to fruition, Giscard stuck closely to the Library Group template, being particularly concerned with keeping the group small. As word of the proposed meeting got out, Giscard doggedly resisted requests from others to be invited, including appeals launched by Canada and Italy, as well as France's smaller European neighbours and the European Commission itself (Naylor 2019; Greenwald 1975; Hillebrand 1975; Morris 1975). While sympathetic to their positions, he was resolutely opposed to any increase to the size of the club, as he saw that a threat to the intimate dynamic he envisaged. By the time of the summit, Giscard had largely got his way, despite, 'à contre coeur' having to allow the Italians to join and having 'to accept a symposium of eighteen Ministers with a wider and more prepared agenda than he had envisaged, though it accorded with his original conception as officials were kept out of the meetings' (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office 1975). Indeed, in part because he could not ultimately resist Italian inclusion 'he resisted the Canadians so obstinately because he did not want to lose control of his idea of the meeting altogether' (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office 1975).

The summit itself was intimate and compact. As a British account of the summit related,

Rambouillet, which was not big enough for everyone, had been chosen to give a house-party atmosphere. This was preserved with some difficulty. American security men, all wired for sound, thronged the corridors. Heavily armed gorillas haunted the park among autumn leaves blown off the trees by the helicopters. The mandarins were compressed rather than suppressed. The British delegation worked in Napoleon's bathroom. Monsieur Sauvagnargues, who seemed strangely disoriented, was reduced to a table in a corridor (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office 1975)

The imposed intimacy also ruffled more than a few ministerial feathers. The British reported that 'the French decision to lodge the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Finance elsewhere than at Rambouillet was inconvenient, and the working arrangements were elegant rather than practical' (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 1976).

While the logistics and staging of the summit have improved considerably over the forty-six years since Rambouillet, the G7 has not much deviated from Giscard's original vision. The formal meeting itself remains limited—as best as possible—to the leaders and their personal representatives who manage the summit process on their behalf, the Sherpas. Beyond the meeting room, delegations likewise tend to



be kept to minimum numbers. The summit site tends to be a relatively small and secluded venue, yielding the double effect of cultivating intimacy while conveniently placing structural limitations on the size of delegations.

This same ethos has underpinned the design of G20 summits. While the club is obviously larger, owing both to increased membership and the functional decision to include specialised technocrats, there remained an imperative in its design to keep the group as small as possible while nonetheless expanding upon the G7's membership so as to increase cultural and geographic representation while better reflecting the contemporary global economic landscape. When first drawing up the membership list for the G20, the group's founders, Canadian Finance Minister Paul Martin and US Treasury Secretary Larry Summers, approached the task with this in mind, keeping a handle on the numbers by extending invitations based largely on previous engagement in global financial governance and centrality to the overall global financial system, while being particularly guarded against the inclusion of additional European states, so to not to reproduce the over-representation they enjoy in the G7 (Martin 2012; Summers 2012). Altogether, this allowed them to identify what states would be most functionally useful in the club while providing a clear argument to fend off numerous petitions from those seeking inclusion (Naylor 2019).

Even conservatively managing the membership in this way, Martin and Summers were nonetheless conscious that it would be impossible to reproduce the G7's intimacy with such expanded numbers (Martin 2012; Summers 2012). As is detailed below, there was hope that this could be mitigated by promoting another hallmark practice of the G7 that they had intended for the G20, that of informal exchange. Nonetheless, the physical arrangement of the G20 reflects the desire to hang on to the G7's practice of intimate engagement. During formal G7 summit sessions, the summit meeting room is restricted to the minimum number of people as possible around the table, usually with just one seat for each leader, with typically a second seat behind each leader for their respective Sherpas. At G7 summits, such an arrangement means that there are ordinarily no more than nine people around the table (one seat for each member state's leader, one for the President of the European Commission, and one for the President of the European Council). A regular-size conference or banquet table fits the bill. If each leader's Sherpa is also present, that brings the total number of people in the room to just under twenty. With the G20, in sharp contrast, any pretence of intimacy is quickly lost. Taking the 2019 Osaka G20 summit as an example, five seats were allocated for each delegation, plus an additional five for the host country, bringing the total number of people in the meeting room to over a hundred- a far cry from an intimate 'house party.' Furthermore, Beyond the leaders' summit meeting room itself, it is also worth noting that there is overall a much larger summit eco-system that surrounds the G20 owing the proliferated engagement groups and ministerial tracks.

The principle of keeping the group as small as possible has thus endured in G-summitry, both in terms of restricting the overall number of members in the G7 and G20 clubs as well as in terms of restricting the number of individuals in any particular summit meeting. However, the significant increase in size of



the G20 renders any attempt at maintaining the trademark intimacy of the G7 impossible.

## Informal exchange

Closely related to the practice of intimate engagement is that of informal exchange. What Giscard and his fellow Library Group members valued in their secret meetings was the ability to engage in free and frank exchange with one another, another leading reason for why they sought to replicate the dynamic at the leaders' level in the G7. Having meetings limited to, ideally, the leaders alone afford the ability for unguarded exchange. Without observation by ministers and bureaucrats with their own agendas or the ever-critical eye of the media, leaders are able to relay and explain their positions and the pressures they face in a way in which they are otherwise largely unable. So unfettered, such summit meetings provide a unique means of overcoming stumbling blocks to negotiations ongoing at other levels, as well as a unique means of building trust and rapport (Naylor 2020).

The British account of the Rambouillet summit goes out of its way to note that there was 'plenty of frank speaking' (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 1976), indicative of such a format being unusual. Giscard was sufficiently pleased with how it went that he thought 'not only that this form of top-level 'conversation' has proved successful, but that it can and should be repeated when necessary' (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 1976).

The degree of informality was sufficiently unusual and candid that in a National Security Council memo, Robert Hormats, who at the time was a senior staff member for International Economic Affairs on the National Security Council, prefaced his remarks to Brent Scowcroft, President Ford's National Security Advisor, with, 'Given the candid nature of the discussions, I am limited distribution of this to you and members of the EPB Executive Committee actively involved in preparations for the meetings; I hope that access can be confined to key officials in the various departments' (Hormats 1975).

At the conclusion of the summit, the leaders discussed how to characterise their meeting and decide on what specifics to make public. They agreed that each government was free to give out their own remarks, but that they 'should use certain adjectives to describe this meeting'. They unanimously agreed to Giscard's suggestions of 'deep and friendly, frank and fruitful' (Hormats 1975). Giscard saw this as being 'more than a personal success for him; he valued the process for itself and particularly for its implications in terms of his view of the concert of the West' (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office 1975).

It is also worth noting that the practice of intimate engagement holds true amongst the Sherpas as well. Sherpas always stress the importance of informality in their contact with one another. As a British Sherpa in the early years of the summits related, Sherpas 'meet often enough to develop a camaraderie and a network of personal friendships which persists even when they cease to be Sherpas' (Armstrong 1991, p. 43).



Knowing first-hand the value of unguarded discussion through his participation in the G7 at the ministerial level, Paul Martin took deliberate steps to ensure that informal exchange would be installed as a cornerstone of the G20. Noting that ‘certain members had some difficulty adjusting to the G7’s tradition of informal, unscripted exchanges with all members at equal footing,’ Martin opened an early G20 finance ministerial by staging a contentious discussion between Trevor Manuel, the South African Finance Minister, and Larry Summers to ‘have at it on the issue of agricultural subsidies’ (Martin 2012). The idea was to ‘demonstrate that frank, informal exchange was not just allowed, but was the rule’ (Naylor 2019, p. 39).

Nonetheless, despite best efforts, the G20 does not lend itself to informal exchange anywhere near as well as the G7 does. As above with the practice of intimate engagement, the size of the group constrains possibilities for freewheeling interaction considerably, not only because there are so many people involved, but because the physical arrangement of G20 meetings to accommodate so many people is structurally restrictive. The larger the table and the larger the audience, the more formal the exchange. A G20 meeting, in other words, is a far cry from the romanticised idea of an intimate ‘fireside chat’.

Moreover, the cultural diversity around the G20 table also detracts from the likelihood of informal exchange, whereas the G7 is a relatively homogenous group of Western-oriented actors, socialised into a particular political and diplomatic culture, the same cannot be said of the more heterogenous G20, wherein the political and diplomatic traditions of some members are such that frank, informal exchange is not so readily practiced. Indeed, this was a particular concern that Martin was trying to overcome in the early G20 meetings (Martin 2012).

The geopolitical mix within the G20 further disincentivises informality, whereas the G7 are a cohesive group of like-minded, democratic allies, the G20 is comprised of sets of regional and global rivals. Candour, particularly exercised in front of an audience (even if is a limited audience), requires degrees of trust. Moreover, a particular added value of having the security to speak frankly is that leaders can share their political vulnerabilities with one another. This is done under the assumption that such admissions will not be used against them, but rather that with fuller shared knowledge of one another’s domestic pressures, leaders might work towards, at best, mitigating them in coming up with integrative solutions to stumbling blocks in negotiations, or, at least, understanding why a leader does not have the room for manoeuvre or political capital give more in a negotiation. Amongst a small group of allies, this is both a relatively safe and useful exercise. Amidst rivals, however, this is not the case, as there is no guarantee that frank admissions will not be used to by others to gain political advantage. To put it more simply, allies have licence to be frank with one another in ways that rivals do not.

Taken altogether, this renders the G20 as necessarily much more formal an affair than the G7. Despite the intention to adopt informality as ‘the rule’ in G20 summitry, the size and composition of the club render its adoption ultimately impossible. The result, as American President Barak Obama dryly observed, is that the G20 follows the ‘standard design to every international summit’ (Obama 2020). Painting a banal picture, Obama relayed that, ‘for the next day and a half... you sit there, fighting off jet lag and doing your best to look interested, as everyone around the





table, including yourself, takes turns reading a set of carefully scripted, anodyne, and invariably much-longer-than-the-time-allotted remarks about whatever topic happens to be on the agenda' (Obama 2020).

## Consensus decision-making

Unlike formal multilateral institutions, there is no voting procedure in the G7. Indeed, the G7's decision-making is not done according to votes at all, but rather is achieved based on consensus. In this respect the G7 functions more like a political cabinet than a multilateral organisation. The practice of consensus decision-making is premised on the club's members regarding one another as equals, with no member having formal authority over any other, and as partners, with no member wanting to steamroll another into a position that is unacceptable to them and no member looking to secure advantage over another. This relatively rare arrangement at the international level is possible in the G7 because it is a close-knit group of ideologically alike, Western-oriented actors whose interests are closely aligned. Much like a political cabinet domestically, the members are held together by common purpose and vision.

The general alignment of G7 members' interests is unsurprising, particularly in its early years with the group almost exclusively dedicated to economic and financial governance. As the world's wealthiest industrialised democracies who subscribed to the Bretton Woods system and, later, the Washington Consensus, they were all heavily invested in—and significantly benefitted from—the neoliberal economic order. That order's maintenance, expansion, and success was their shared, chief concern, and has served as the club's galvanizing objective throughout its history. So robustly allied, despite occasional disagreement over priorities or means, the overall objectives of the club have been almost entirely uncontested, rendering a consensus decision-making model tenable, such that even in instances of disagreement, the group unwaveringly affirmed its commitment to pillars of neoliberal order annually, most notably as advocates of trade liberalisation and the removal of protectionist barriers (Putnam and Bayne 1984).

The extent to which alignment has rendered the practice of consensus decision-making in the G7 not just possible, but successful, can be illustrated by the sole period in which the group's members lost their shared vision and purpose. Under the Presidency of Donald Trump, the USA went from being a leading voice within the club to being its pariah. The significance of Donald Trump's elevation to the Oval Office to the G7 was that for the first time in its history its most powerful member was out of step with its allies on fundamental assumptions, shared understandings, and common objectives which had otherwise galvanised the club. Illustratively, the 2017 Taormina G7 summit, President Trump's first, marked the first time that the club released a concluding communiqué in which not all members of the club unanimously signed up to each of its paragraphs. The USA refused to confirm its commitment to the Paris Agreement and affirm the fact of climate change, resulting in an unprecedented communiqué paragraph in which six of the G7 members, as well as the European Commission and European Council, reaffirmed its commitment to the





climate change accord, while stating that the USA was ‘not in a position to join the consensus on these topics’ (Government of Italy 2017).

At the following summit in Charlevoix, Canada in 2018, President Trump infamously ‘unsigned’ the G7’s communiqué after leaving the summit early (and in so doing avoiding the group’s session on the environment). Such a move was likewise unprecedented, leaving his G7 colleagues, their delegations, and the assembled media baffled, wondering if President Trump’s fiat by tweet was even permissible. As, by definition, there is no charter or set of rules governing an informal governance institution, there was no stipulation that prevented a leader from reneging on the group’s consensus. Nonetheless, without rules, there was likewise nothing preventing the rest of the club from simply ignoring President’s Trump’s bluster. The group’s unprecedented rift continued in 2019 at the Biarritz G7 summit, where, despite climate and the environment being a priority theme for the French hosts, no climate commitments were made in the communiqué, regarded in part as a ploy on the part of French President Emmanuel Macron to avoid a repeat of what happened to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in Charlevoix the year before (Warren 2021).

The point of focusing on this period of discord in the G7’s history is to emphasise how unusual it was, being the only time that the G7 failed to live up to its hallmark practice of consensus decision-making. It also illustrates the extent to which individual personalities matter, itself a central element in the practices of intimate engagement and informal exchange. With President Trump diverging so radically from both his G7 partners and from the USA’s established foreign policy, the club found itself suddenly unable to reach consensus on what had otherwise been uncontroversial points of commonality, such as the benefits of upholding the neoliberal governance order or whether to confront the world’s most pressing issues, climate change chief among them.

This dissonant period, while unprecedented for the G7 and severely limiting its efficacy as a group, is not so foreign to the G20. While the G20 has adopted the G7’s practice of consensus decision-making, the club’s composition renders achievement of consensus agreement on substantive issues far less likely. Whereas the G7 is—with the one momentary exception detailed above—a group of likeminded, allies, the G20 is filled with a diverse set of either non-allied actors or outright rivals. This is so both at the global scale of rivalry, with the inclusion of the USA, China, and Russia, as well as it is at the regional scale amongst peer competitors, as it particularly the case in South and East Asia, with India, Japan, and South Korea members of the club alongside China. While logically the likelihood of consensus agreement decreases with any increase in the size of membership, the chance concordance is all the more unlikely when members’ interests are not only divergent from one another, but in significant instances actually contrary to one another.

Consensus decision-making in any context has a ‘lowest common denominator’ pull. As above with the G7 during the Trump years, this particularly hobbled the club when it came to trade liberalisation and climate change, forcing the group to accept ‘watered down’ communiqués, else risk failing to achieve consensus agreement at all (Gramer 2019; Jones 2017). In the case of the G20, given its composition, this is more the rule than the exception (Kaleem 2015; Mathiesen 2016; NBC



News 2010; Sainsbury and Wurf 2015). The consequence is that the G20 is predisposed to not achieve ambitious policy agreements. As such, while the G20 has adopted the G7's practice of consensus decision-making, it is unable to achieve as much with it.

## Outreach and engagement

Outreach with 'engagement partners' has been a central feature of G7 governance since the late-seventies, when the group began convening 'mini-summits' of business leaders from member countries to meet in advance of the leaders' summit and make their views known to the G7 leaders (Armstrong 1980). G7 engagement has broadened considerably beyond the business community, most substantively with the inclusion of civil society in its preparatory and summit processes. The high-water mark for civil society inclusion being the 2005 Gleneagles Summit, at which Make Poverty History Campaign, the ONE Foundation, Oxfam, the Gates Foundation, and the Live8 movement played central roles in pushing for African debt relief (Cooper 2007; Naylor 2019). In the ensuing years, engagement processes have proliferated such that the UK hosts of the 2021 G7 summit are managing six concurrent engagement processes: the Youth 7, Women 7, Science 7, Labour 7, Civil Society 7, and Business 7 (UK Government 2021a, b).

Alongside engagement with non-state actors, the G7 has engaged with non-member states throughout its history. In the club's early years, Canada, Australia, and members of the European Community were regularly briefed by members on the group's activities, being one means by which to placate those particularly aggrieved by exclusion from the group.<sup>1</sup> The G7's relations with the newly formed Russian Federation in the early-90s led to Russia's temporary inclusion of the group, forming the G8 (until 2014 when the G7 returned to its original state) and marked a formalisation of the engagement with non-member states, culminating in the 'Outreach 5'—or 'Heiligendamm'—process in 2005 in which Brazil, India, China, Mexico, and South Africa became official engagement partners of the G8. The Heiligendamm Process paved the way for the eventual inclusion of the Outreach 5 in the group, though this was abandoned in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis and the subsequent elevation of the G20 to the leaders' level. Additionally, since 2002 the G7 has invited African representation at summits, coinciding the group's increased focus in the noughties on international development and debt relief issues. As such, it is established practice that the Chair of the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the African Union (AU) Chairs are annually invited as guests to the summit.

The G7's commitment to the inclusion of non-state actors and non-member states stems from a concern over the club's legitimacy and a desire to increase the group's efficacy. In one respect, it is a means of increasing the legitimacy of the exclusive

<sup>1</sup> In the case of Canada, this was only so for the Rambouillet summit, as thereafter they became members of the club.



club, particularly in the eyes of those who excluded by it who feel they ought to be included (Naylor 2019). In another respect, it is a recognition that effective governance includes a broad and diverse array of stakeholders, state and non-state alike. Taken together, this is indicative of a subscription to a democratic governance model which recognises both that it is necessary to mitigate the exclusivity of exclusive multilateralism and that there are benefits to doing so, be it in terms of an increase in legitimacy or the production of better policy.

The G20, while more diverse and representative in its composition, nonetheless remains an exclusive club. As such, like the G7, it is subject to critique that it lacks legitimacy and also has the potential to benefit in policy-development terms from the inclusion of non-members, state and non-state alike (Brandi 2019; Luckhurst 2019). The G20 has thus developed an extensive outreach and engagement process, which was particularly accelerated in 2012 at the Los Cabos G20 summit wherein the Business 20 and Think 20 were formally institutionalised.<sup>2</sup> The Italian hosts of the 2021 summit managed eight engagement groups: Business 20, Think 20, Women 20, Youth 20, Labour 20, Urban 20, Civil 20, and Science 20 (Government of Italy 2021).

Also like the G7, the G20 engages with non-member states as a matter of course, annually extending invitations to guest countries. Membership in the G20 has been hotly contested, both during its inception at the ministerial level and during its elevation to the leaders' level in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis. The politics surrounding inclusion in the annual summits was eventually settled with G20 members agreeing to a set formula for issuing invitations to non-members, with Spain being the permanent guest of the group, the rotating AU and ASEAN Chairs receiving invitations, the host country being free to invite two regional guests, and the host country also being free to invite the heads of relevant international organisations, with the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development being regularly represented at the summit.

The G20 has thus enthusiastically adopted the G7's commitment to plurilateral networked governance. However, much like the case with the practice of consensus decision-making, the size and composition of the G20 are such that the adoption of the practice of outreach engagement does not imply the same dynamics, benefits, or effects as in the G7. As concerns the size of the club, the engagement processes are so expansive as to include a staggeringly large number of actors, thus reducing the potential influence or effect of any particular actor in the process and increasing the likelihood of 'watering down' of any particular engagement process communiqué. Illustratively, the inclusion of certain (large and well financed) civil society organisations (CSOs) with particular ideological leanings results in the absence of references to abortion or contraception in policy papers submitted by the coordinating body of American CSOs to the G20 (Naylor 2019, p. 79).

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<sup>2</sup> The Canadians hosted the first B20 as part of the 2010 Toronto G20 summit, but it was not formally made a part of the preparatory process until 2012.



The composition of the G20 is also such that there is no uniform understanding about the legitimacy or role of civil society actors. While there is settled agreement amongst the democratic members of the club that civil society has a legitimate and necessary role to play in governance and policy making, this is not the case amongst the non-democratic members of the group. Indeed, in many cases civil society actors are seen as threats to regime survival, rather than as governance partners. The consequence is that while the G20 has committed to an annual engagement process with civil society actors, the nature of that inclusion is uneven across years. As the G20, in lieu of having a permanent secretariat, has also adopted the G7's 'troika' system for managing the summit—wherein the past, current, and, subsequent hosts of the summit serves as the G20's steering committee, with the current host being *primes inter pares*—the quality of engagement is largely at the behest of any given year's host. This means that there are bumper years for civil society engagement, while in others it is more tepid. The summits between 2012 and 2014, hosted by Mexico, Russia, and Australia in the early days of the C20's formalisation were viewed by civil society actors as involving robust, substantive engagement (Currah 2012; Price-Thomas 2016; Rea 2014). Indeed, civil society actors were surprised by the depth of Russia's commitment to the engagement process (Rea 2014). This series was followed by summits hosted by Turkey and China, host who were less committed to a substantive engagement process in which civil society actors had meaningful autonomy. Indeed, in the case of the 2016 G20 in Hangzhou, China, major civil society organisations, Oxfam chief among them, who were otherwise annual participants in G-summitry sat the year out. In the years since, civil society has returned to enjoying relatively substantive engagement in the G20 process, via the ministerial and leaders' tracks as well as the summit's working groups.

As with the other G7 practices embraced by the G20 discussed above, the size and composition of the G20 affects how these practices actually play out in their adopted context such that their dynamics in the G7 are not replicated in the G20. In the case of outreach engagement, the informality of the club has a particularly noteworthy conditioning effect, as it provides the authority and power to the host government to engineer the summit processes according to its interests, whereas in the case of the G7, this does not lead to much variation in the quality of engagement, owing to the homogeneity of this club as a group of likeminded, democratic allies, in the case of the G20 the result is different, owing to there being no universal agreement on fundamental tenants of participatory governance.

## Conspicuous governance

The practices so far discussed have not transposed as well as might be expected in spreading from the G7 to G20. In contrast, the practice of what I term 'conspicuous governance' has been successfully adopted by the G20. Conspicuous governance is the practice of being *seen* to govern, wherein the performance of governing is an end in itself. Conspicuous governance does not imply that a summit is pure artifice that achieves nothing substantive (it may or may not), but emphasises that irrespective of any negotiated agreement or policy outcomes, the very act of meeting—or,



more precisely, to be *seen* to be meeting—yields substantive effects in the international domain. Conspicuous governance regularly entails what I have elsewhere termed, ‘sublime governance’, wherein the ritualistic, theatrical dimensions of summitry, such as the pomp and spectacle of welcoming ceremonies, are particularly emphasised (Naylor 2020). Conspicuous governance does not necessarily involve full-blown ostentatious theatrics, but very often involves at least some performative dimension, such as the annual ritual of taking a ‘family photograph’ of leaders assembled for a summit. The G-summits held during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate the perceived necessity of such a practice well (Danielson and Hedling 2021). Even when leaders could not meet in person and were forced to instead hold ‘virtual summits’ online, they still took—and, critically, broadcast to the world—family photographs.

The practice has both a constitutive aim and a functional aim. The sublime or theatrical dimensions “play essential roles in the production of a summit as a break from normal politics, elevating the event to the figurative heights of international diplomacy, and in so doing transforming its participants from mere political actors to the exalted status of ‘statesperson’” (Naylor 2020, p. 586; Cohen 1987; Constantinou 2018, 2016, 1998; Death 2010; McConnell 2018; Neumann 2013; Shimazu 2014; Sidaway 2001). This constitutive purpose lays the foundations for the functional aim of conspicuous governance, which is to appear ‘in control’. As J.D. Armstrong relayed while discussing the early G7 summits, faced with international economic upheaval within an international context that appeared ungovernable owing to its complexity and the apparent difficulty of the issues, ‘the role of diplomatic theatre is... to provide some degree of reassurance... that there is some degree of governance as such in the international system: some sense that leaders are in control of events which, in reality, frequently control them’ (Armstrong 1996, p. 50). The point is to appear to be ‘doing something’, even if there is nothing that can be done (Meibauer 2017). For Armstrong, regardless of what policy effects might have come from any of the G7’s meetings, the practice of conspicuous governance held consistent across them and consistently yielded effects.

The G20 has adopted the conspicuous governance practices of the G7 without amendment. Performatively, the G20 sticks to the same ritualistic script, with every summit following the same routine involving welcoming ceremonies at both the airport and the summit site, a ‘family photograph’ of leaders, formal open and closing declarations by the host leader, and the full array of flags, motorcades, and other trappings of officialdom along the way. As exercises in sublime governance, the G20 does not cut corners. As an exercise in reassurance, the G20 likewise sticks to the script. This is particularly evident in the club’s elevation to the leaders’ level in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis. The earliest G20 summits were as much about demonstrating solidarity, resolve, and confidence, and, in so doing, calming markets, as they were about knitting together solutions to the crisis (Cooper 2019, 2010).

The responses of the G7 and G20 to the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate the endurance and centrality of the practice of conspicuous governance in both cases. Both clubs held extraordinary online summits in response to the pandemic—the G7 on the 16 March, 2020 and the G20 on the 26 March. What is noteworthy is how little these meetings accomplished in terms of new policy, coordination, or funding (Chodor



2020; Goodman et al. 2020; Naylor 2020). To be surprised or disappointed by this, however, is to miss the point of these extraordinary meetings. Despite the apparent omnipotence with which leaders are bestowed through the theatrics of sublime governance, to paraphrase Armstrong, COVID was more in control of the leaders than the leaders were in control of COVID. The objective of the meetings was the meetings themselves, to ‘restore confidence’, as both the G7 and G20 communiqués stated, through the practice of conspicuous governance (Council of the European Union 2020; G20 2020).

What differentiates this practice from those previously analysed is that the efficacy of conspicuous governance does not depend on the size or composition of the group in the way that the others do. Indeed, the increased size and heterogenous composition of the G20 might actually bolster the success of this practice in this context, as the meeting of a more representative and diverse assemblage of actors better projects the illusion of control that the smaller, homogenous G7 no longer can in the contemporary *global* governance context.

It is worth noting that while the practice of conspicuous governance has been presented here with a focus on times in which the G7 and G20’s functioned as crisis committees, the practice of conspicuous governance is not limited to such instances. Indeed, the significance of the practice is also to be found in its effects at ‘normal’ periods. As above, the purpose of conspicuous governance is not just to project the illusion of control in the face of crisis, but also in the face of complexity and intractability. This further lends credence to the conjecture that this practice not only works in the G20, but is more efficacious in this context than in the G7. By virtue of being larger, more diverse, and more representative, this club is better able to perform the parlour trick of making it appear as if the international domain is governable at all.

## Exclusive multilateralism

The final practice that the G20 adopts from the G7 is that of exclusive multilateralism— a practice, as in the case with conspicuous governance, that has been successfully adopted by the larger club. Exclusive multilateralism is the creation of groups that, while not hierarchically organised—at least not formally—are nonetheless ‘highly exclusive’ (Viola 2020, p. 85). As Lora Ann Viola relates, exclusive multilateralism,

‘is a strategy of partitioning the full membership by closing an institution to all but a limited group of ‘like-minded’ actors. Leading states, for example, can choose to institutionalize meetings amongst themselves to cooperate on common issues and then present the results of these meetings to the rest of the members in the system, thereby circumventing divergent voices and preferences that might derail the pursuit of their core interests’ (Viola 2020, p. 85).

Viola points to the G7 as a quintessential example of exclusive multilateralism at work, having ‘first developed in the 1970s as a forum for wealthy Western states to meet at a time when international institutional membership expanded to include



postcolonial states' (Viola 2020, p. 6). Indeed, Viola asserts that the significance of the G7's establishment was not just that it provided 'a forum for exchanging ideas and coordinating economic policy but also a new institutional model for global governance decision-making—one based on exclusive multilateralism' (Viola 2020, p. 204). The strategic move is to engage in a form of 'social closure', wherein group members disproportionately benefit from the monopolisation of control, advantages, and opportunities that flow from inclusion, while excluded actors are stuck in a position of relative passivity as international society's 'rule takers' (Keene 2011; Naylor 2021, 2019; Viola 2020). As Vijay Prashad relays, Helmut Schmidt argued at the Rambouillet summit that leaving decisions 'to officials somewhere in Africa or some Asian capital is not a good idea' (Prashad 2014, p. 42). Rather, Prashad continues, 'The G7 had to exercise control; everyone else had to be directed' (Prashad 2014, p. 42).

The G20 might appear to not fit the definition of exclusive multilateralism given that, as above, the club is sufficiently not 'like-minded' so as to hobble the successful adoption of other informal practices. While politically, culturally, geographically, and ideologically diverse, what unites the group is a universal subscription to the prevailing economic order, albeit with reform. As above with the G7 at its establishment, of primary importance is maintaining control of the governance order, even if that means accepting greater heterogeneity in the group's composition. As Viola argues, while on the face of it the G20 appears more inclusive and diverse, it 'is better understood... as a defensive move that secures the privileges of core actors rather than as an expansive move that makes the system more inclusive' (Viola 2020, p. 208). That the G20 includes less robust economies that are nonetheless 'systematically significant', such as Russia and Argentina, underlines the point. While their membership dilutes the exclusivity of the club, their inclusion allows for more economically stable G20 members to exercise authority over them via monitoring and the proposal of regulatory reform, overall increasing the likelihood that these systemically risky countries do not pose an overall threat to the prevailing economic order (Viola 2020, p. 208). The same holds true for rising powers, wherein their inclusion can be seen as a co-optive move to ensure that they rise within the status quo order, rather than rise in such a way as to challenge it (Naylor 2019). Taken together, inclusion 'brings these states under the authority of governance mechanisms and submits them to country-level monitoring to promote the stability of a system that brings financial gain to the most powerful' (Viola 2020, p. 209).

As with the practices above, the size of the club is relevant to the practice of exclusive multilateralism— the larger the club, the less exclusive it is. That said, size affects this practice differently than it does others. In this case, what matters is the relative size between the exclusive in-group and the larger out-group. This stands in contradistinction to other practices wherein what is significant is the relative change in size between the G7 and G20, whereas with the previously discussed, less successfully transplanted practices, the size of the club more than doubles in the move from the G7 to the G20 contexts. In the case of outreach engagement, the scale of increase is even greater. In the case of exclusive multilateralism, however, the general ratio between included and excluded actors does not actually change that much. Despite a more expansive membership, the G20 remains highly exclusive vis-à-vis





the entire international system. Even though the G20 is relatively less exclusive than the G7, in overall terms, relative exclusivity is not diminished all that much.

Additionally, as an incorporative, co-optive strategy to maintain control of the international system more broadly, exclusive multilateralism works better when exercised by the G20 than the G7 owing to the latter's limitations, particularly in terms of legitimacy, in the contemporary global governance context. No longer dominant economically, the G7 today lacks the authority and power that it had at the time of its inception in the mid-1970s. Indeed, the move to establish the G20 at the ministerial was at the very least a tacit acknowledgement of this fact in the wake of the financial crises of the mid-1990s, with the elevation of the club to the leaders' level in the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis confirming it (Cooper and Thakur 2013). Moreover, the G7's identity as a small group of Western-oriented democracies—and, more to the point, the legitimacy deficit that flows from it—likewise undercuts the group's authority within the broader international system.

While the G7 has tried to ameliorate its fading legitimacy through outreach and engagement, these efforts can only fall short given that full membership remains closed. One direction, however, in which the G7 seems to be flirting with the prospect of increasing its membership is by expanding to include other democracies. The invitations to the 2021 UK-hosted G7 summit in Carbis Bay reflects this, with South Korea, India, Australia, and South Africa invited as guests. In justifying these invitations, the UK government emphasised that this fulfilled British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's aim 'to use the G7 to intensify cooperation between the world's democratic and technologically advanced nations' and that agreements amongst these eleven democracies 'will have an even greater impact on the world, showing how democratic nations are working together to make their citizens safer and more prosperous' (UK Government 2021a, b). While such a prospective reform of the club would be the most dramatic overhaul in its history, as a strategy to regain the sort of control that exclusive multilateralism can yield, it is likely to fall short, given that the expansion would not overcome ideological and political objections to the implied notion that Western-style democracies have any sort of legitimist right to dominate global governance. While such an expansion might give the G7 renewed purpose and identity, it is unlikely to imbue it with the authority to govern beyond the limits of the club in the way that the G20 can. Simply put, the G20 is more likely to continue to accrue the benefits that derive from the practice of exclusive multilateralism for the foreseeable future.

## Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that despite the adoption of G7 practices by the G20, key practices that have been central to the success of the former do not necessarily entail success in the latter. The practices of intimate engagement, informal exchange, consensus decision-making, and outreach engagement have been mainstays of the G7 since its inception and are dimensions of this informal club that differentiate it in significant ways from formal multilateral institutions. Indeed, these practices were instituted in the club deliberately so as to avoid what were perceived



as shortcomings and limitations of formal institutions, particularly the IMF. As is detailed above, these same practices transposed into the G20 actually serve to undermine the potential success of the club owing to its larger size and heterogenous composition. Strengths of the G7 are potential liabilities to the G20.

The practices of conspicuous governance and exclusive multilateralism, however, have transplanted well. Indeed, in the contemporary global governance context, the objectives of these practices are better achieved in the G20 than in the G7. What differentiates these practices from the others is that the goods they bring to individual club members are non-rival and cannot be used for strategic advantage by one club member against another. The collective exercise of conspicuous governance and exclusive multilateralism benefits all club members equally and cannot be instrumentalised by any particular club member to gain advantage over another, whereas a practice like informal exchange can be. Moreover, by virtue of the ways these practices thus work, their incentive structures bind actors together, even if they are rivals, as the diminishment of either of these practices for any particular actor diminishes it for all others. In all, these practices work in the G20 because the size of the club is not so great so as to dilute their efficacy and because they can be practiced safely amongst non-allied actors.

What is further noteworthy is that conspicuous governance and exclusive multilateralism are both fundamentally about control—or, at least, the *appearance* of control—and that they are externally oriented practices that situate the club relative to those excluded from it, whereas the other practices analysed here are principally about a club's internal workings, conspicuous governance and exclusive multilateralism are more about a club's role and position in the overall international system, particularly articulated in terms of status. This is significant because it reveals the likely limits of informal multilateralism at the global scale as well as what functions global informal governance groups can reliably carry out.

As size and heterogenous composition negatively affects internally oriented practices at the global scale, the benefits derived from these practices are less likely to be realised in governance contexts like the G20. This is not to say that they might not yield advantages, but to highlight that it is an error to assume that they will work in the same way and with the same success as they do in a smaller, less diverse, more closely-knit governance group. What does reliably work at this scale, however, are practices that accrue and confirm status and authority, and project the semblance of control that comes from the perception of status and authority. The practices that move well from the G7 to the G20 and work well in latter context, in other words, are those that ascribe and position its members as the international system's ranking governance actors, rather than the practices that could bolster their deliberative and policy-making abilities as such actors.

This is not to condemn the G20 as necessarily being a less efficacious actor than the G7 or as being little more than a 'talk shop' (Eccleston et al. 2015; Rachman 2010; Slaughter 2017; Wolverson 2010). Rather, what this highlights is that the same practices carried out by different G-summitry groups work in different ways and, in the aggregate, achieve different aims. As such, scholars and practitioners alike need to be cognisant of these distinctions between how these clubs operate and



take this into account when drawing conclusions or making projections about their performance, despite on the surface appearing to function in the same ways.

This also calls attention to scholarship on institutions as they relate to rising powers and their status concerns (Paul et al. 2014; Paul and Shankar 2014; Welch Larson and Shevchenko 2014). Paul and Shankar have argued that the inclusion of rising powers in clubs like the G20 increases the likelihood of such powers' ascendancy being relatively pacific, as the 'institutional integration of a rising power is the key to obtaining peaceful status accommodation' (Paul and Shankar 2014). Larson and Shevchenko congruently argue that 'rising powers will be more likely to cooperate in global governance if doing so will bring them enhanced status and recognition' (Welch Larson and Shevchenko 2014, p. 34). What has been presented here adds a qualification to this line of argumentation in the wider status literature. As above, it is the status-related practices that have transposed well from the G7 to the G20; however, owing to status being a fundamentally subjective, social phenomenon, the prestige and esteem garnered from inclusion is at least in part tethered to the efficacy of the club—or, more precisely, non-members' perception of the club's efficacy—as is the case with more traditional understandings of 'great powers' clubs (Bull 1977; Dunne 2003; Gilpin 1983; Scott 2006). What thus remains an open question is whether particular features and constraints of the G20 that undermine the functionally-related practices imported from the G7 will ultimately also undermine the status-related practices.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author confirms that there is no conflict of interest.

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