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Specialized Committees of International Organizations an Important Source of Organizational Autonomy

Michael Giesen[1] | Thomas Gehring[2] | Simon Linder[3] | Thomas Rixen[3]

[1]Universität Potsdam, Potsdam, Germany | [2]Universität Bamberg, Bamberg, Germany | [3]Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Correspondence: Thomas Gehring (thomas.gehring@uni-bamberg.de)

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ABSTRACT

Assigning the preparation of decisions to specialized committees composed of member state representatives is a widespread response to the 'governor's dilemma', that is, the tension between competence and control, in international organizations (IOs). We theorize a causal mechanism referring to self-selection and agenda-setting effects and show how the resulting division of labor among IO bodies produces organizational influence beyond current accounts of committee governance. We demonstrate why specialized committees develop a distinct rationale of accommodating expertise with member state preferences, even if composed of member state representatives, and why agreed committee proposals are difficult to overcome by final decision-making bodies. We argue that the organization of IO decision processes constitutes an important source of IO autonomy beyond the activities of IO administrations and independent from socialization or predispositions of individual committee members. Empirically, we show that IO committees meet the theoretically derived prerequisites for activating the causal mechanism and trace how committee influence according to the mechanism has shaped an important IO decision.

1 | Introduction

Can international organizations (IOs) gain autonomy from activities of their specialized committees, even if their decision processes are dominated by their members? Specialized committees address only a sub-set of IO issues and are predominantly composed of expert-level governmental officials. Like domestic (Bark 2021) and international administrations (Littoz-Monnet 2017; Herold et al. 2021), they provide information on policy-relevant issues and prepare decision proposals. Involving them in IO decision-making helps "marry expertise with politics" (Thiemann and Stellinga 2023, 533) without delegating tasks to IO secretariats or other institutional agents capable of independent action. Thus, it provides a specific and widespread response to the "governor's dilemma," that is, the notorious tension between competence and control (Abbott et al. 2020). So far, IO autonomy is predominantly attributed to IO secretariats (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Graham 2014) and other institutional agents (Hawkins et al. 2008), while activities of member-state bodies have not been identified as relevant sources. IO secretariats provide information and develop distinct organizational cultures (Nielson et al. 2006; Nelson and Weaver 2016) and administrative styles (Jankauskas et al. 2024) that allow them to define organizational preferences and gain autonomy (Ege et al. 2020, 562–563). In contrast, the autonomy-generating role of specialized committees and their influence in IO decision processes have received surprisingly little scientific attention, despite their ubiquitous presence in contemporary IOs. Principal-agent theorists address the need for expertise as an important driver for delegating tasks to agents (Hawkins et al. 2008), but rarely discuss committees, especially if composed of IO member state representatives. The few contributions recognizing the ubiquity of specialized committees in IOs (Bradley and Kelley 2008) do not investigate their effects on IO decision processes.

The bulk of scholarship on committees in the European Union and transnational expert networks lacks a clear organizational focus. Scholars of European integration adopting a sociological institutionalist perspective emphasize socialization effects of committee members. They observe that EU implementation committees (so-called "comitology committees") composed of member state representatives established under particular legal acts are characterized by a "deliberative" or "problem-solving" style of interaction, rather than hard bargaining or contentious voting (Joerges and Neyer 1997). Likewise, EU Council working groups preparing formal legislative acts for final decision by the Council seem to operate relatively smoothly according to informal rules and practices (Lewis 2003). In contrast, rational institutionalists conceive of EU committees composed of member state representatives as "miniature Councils" without significant effects for their internal dynamics (Blom-Hansen and Brandsma 2009). After all, comitology committees have been established to control and limit activities of the European Commission (Pollack 2003, 114–146) and the members of Council working groups are immediately responsible to their ministers. Administrative science scholars reveal the primary loyalty of the members of these committees to their respective member states (Egeberg et al. 2003). International Relations (IR) scholarship points out that transnational government networks (Slaughter 2005), epistemic communities (Haas 1992), and transgovernmental relations (Keohane and Nye 1974) make cooperation more likely, but does not specifically address the role of committees in IOs. Yet other scholars discuss the role of network-based specialized organizations like the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision (Tsingou 2015; Pagliari and Young 2014), but hardly address the role of specialized bodies *within* IOs.

To examine the effects of preparatory committees on IO decisions as a source of IO autonomy from an organizational perspective, we focus on the entire organizational process, which includes, at the minimum, a preparatory committee and a supreme decision-making body. In contrast to the predominant conception of "IOs as bureaucracies" (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 16), IOs are best conceived of as decision-making systems based on incomplete contracts concluded by their member states. When founding an IO, states define core components of the underlying cooperation project, including membership, purpose, basic principles, and initial commitments, and assign implementation decisions to the IO. Subsequently, this IO decides through activities of its bodies on implementation, and possibly further development, of the project (Abbott and Snidal 1998). Member states may delegate tasks to institutional agents, for example, IO secretariats, and invest them with resources and competencies (Hawkins et al. 2008; Nielson and Tierney 2003). They can also assign organizational decisions to bodies comprising all or a subset of member-states, a mode called "pooling" (Lake 2007). Hooghe et al. (2019, 33) emphasize that "it is perfectly possible to conceive an authoritative international organization in which non-state actors play no role at all if the principals collectively make decisions that are binding on individual states. This mode of authority is … at least as consequential as delegation." Generally, IOs exercise international political authority (Zürn et al. 2012; Hooghe and Marks 2015), whenever their decisions are binding on their members and, possibly, other addressees. They gain autonomy to the degree that organizational decisions are systematically affected by organizational factors and cannot be explained simply as an aggregation of member state preferences (Reinalda and Verbeek 1998, 3). With increasing organizational autonomy, we need to know more about the "going-ons" within IOs, including their committee systems, and less about specific member state preferences, to explain organizational decisions (Haftel and Thompson 2006).

A theory-based organizational perspective on the role and characteristics of preparatory committees in IOs can draw on a few rational institutionalist contributions on committee governance that assess organizational decisions as a consequence of the interaction of different bodies involved. The deliberative style of interaction in EU comitology committees has been explained by the tight institutional constraints of committee activities arising from close policy guidance of the underlying legal act and interaction between IO bodies (Gehring and Kerler 2008). The rich scholarship on the implications of legislative committees for decision-making in the United States Congress (Krehbiel 1992; Martin 2014) emphasizes that self-selection effects among the members of Congress result in a relatively homogeneous composition of parliamentary committees (Weingast and Marshall 1988, 148). In turn, committee proposals produce agenda-setting effects that render it difficult for decision-making bodies to deviate from committee proposals (Martin 2014; generally Pollack 2003, 47–56). Accordingly, assigning selective tasks, such as preparing decision proposals, to specialized committees may create a division of labor among IO bodies that fulfill complementary (i.e., different) functions. In this vein, Conrad and Monroe (2021, 612) suggest that "scholars can better understand outcomes in IOs by developing theories that explicitly make assumptions about legislative process."

Theoretically, we argue that assigning preparation of decision proposals to specialized committees enmeshes IO member states in institutional constraints and induces them to follow an organizational logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1998, 951–952), even if all relevant bodies are composed of representatives of all IO member states. We demonstrate (i) why specialized committees are likely to develop proposals that differ from those elaborated in general membership bodies, even if they are composed of representatives of all IO members, (ii) why supreme membership bodies tend to accept proposals submitted by specialized committees, and (iii) why agreed conclusions of specialized committees influence negotiations over the political accommodation of diverging preferences in supreme decision-making bodies. A distinct logic of appropriateness is known as a typical characteristic of organizations. It may arise from institutional effects of a specific form of organizing IO decision processes and indicates organizational autonomy.

Empirically, we focus on IOs with little or no delegation to institutional agents that differ from the traditional, highly bureaucratized formal IOs of the post-World War II period. The issue area of global financial market regulation is populated by numerous informal IOs like the Basel Committee or the International Accounting Standards Board (Tsingou 2015;

Pagliari and Young 2014). Likewise, many multilateral environmental agreements, such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, comprise organizational components authorized to flesh out or implement treaty provisions (Churchill and Ulfstein 2000; Morin et al. 2022). These IOs are formally or informally authorized to issue international regulations or distribute international funds and thus exercise international political authority (Hooghe and Marks 2015; Lake 2010), but exhibit significantly lower levels of delegation than traditional IOs. They constitute new and widespread forms of governance in the absence of extensive administrations (Vabulas and Snidal 2013; Roger 2020). They are ideal to investigate organizational effects that are not primarily influenced by activities of secretariats and other institutional agents. Here, Thompson's (2006, 6) observation certainly holds that "delegation to congressional committees … more closely matches circumstances at the international level than does delegation to large, autonomous bureaucracies."

The article contributes to several debates. *First*, we provide a fresh approach to the analysis of committee influence in IOs and beyond. Insights from the study of US Congress committees (Krehbiel 1992; Martin 2014) point at the importance of interaction among IO bodies in broader organizational decision processes, such as self-selection effects and agenda setting. So far, scholars have almost exclusively focused on EU committees in isolation, in particular on comitology committees, which are widespread in the EU, but rare in IOs. We demonstrate that even preparatory committees may create significant effects on IO decisions that arise from institutional constraints, not individual predispositions or socialization of their members. *Second*, by theorizing the implications of IO preparatory committees, we advance the broader discussion on the organizational effects of IOs. While conventional wisdom attributes IO autonomy predominantly to IO secretariats (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Hawkins et al. 2008; Graham 2014), we show that it can also arise from committee activities. *Third*, by analyzing IOs with little or no secretariats *as organizations*, we contribute to the debate on informal IOs and other types of IOs in which organizational decisions are mainly or entirely made by member state bodies (Vabulas and Snidal 2013; Roger 2020). While informal IOs are primarily treated as arenas for member state interaction, although scholars recognize the need for more "work to explore the 'goings on' within IIGOs" (Vabulas 2019, 414), we show that they may exercise political authority with a considerable degree of organizational autonomy.

In Section 2, we develop a causal mechanism that demonstrates how involving preparatory committees in IO decision processes influences organizational decisions (thus producing organizational autonomy), based on rational institutionalist accounts of IO decision-making and insights from committee-based decision-making in the US Congress and the EU. In Section 3, we discuss three prerequisites for activating the causal mechanism and investigate their presence in 20 member-driven IOs from global financial market regulation and international environmental protection based on an original dataset. We find that the committee systems of these IOs generally meet the theoretically derived institutional conditions for generating committee-driven IO autonomy and indeed promise to trigger committee-based IO autonomy. In Section 4, a qualitative case study of an important decision of the Oslo and Paris Convention to protect the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic (OSPAR) traces how the theoretically derived causal mechanism works in practice. It demonstrates how involving specialized committees actually produced an IO decision that cannot be explained by member state preferences alone.

2 | A Theory of Committee-Based Organizational Autonomy

In this section, we develop a theory of committee-based organizational autonomy. It demonstrates how even strategic actors are gradually enmeshed in institutional constraints that result in an organizationally produced logic of appropriateness if specialized committees prepare IO decisions. We provide a general account of why committee-based decision-making may produce IO autonomy (Section 2.1) and theorize the constellation of preparatory committees and decision-making bodies in multi-stage decision procedures (Section 2.2). Subsequently, we examine the consequences of this functional differentiation of IO decision processes for the activities of specialized committees (Section 2.3) and supreme membership bodies (Section 2.4).

2.1 | Committee-Based IO Autonomy

Broadly speaking, IOs gain autonomy, whenever organizational decisions are influenced by organizational factors, rather than merely reflecting aggregated member state preferences (Reinalda and Verbeek 1998, 3). This conception of organizational autonomy is in line with large parts of IO scholarship (e.g., Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 10–11; Zürn et al. 2021). It focuses on the distinct logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1998, 951–952) that characterizes organizational decision-making. It differs from the principal-agent conception of autonomy defined as the ability of an agent to act in ways unintended by principals and not covered by the delegation contract ("agency slack," Hawkins et al. 2008, 8; Cortell and Peterson 2022, 402), which is not applicable to IO bodies composed of member state representatives.

Constructivist and public administration scholars emphasize that *IO secretariats* gain autonomy and may develop collective preferences through their distinct organizational cultures (Nelson and Weaver 2016) or styles (Ege et al. 2020). Organizational culture denotes a specific system of meaning consisting of shared beliefs, norms, and routines that dominate within an IO secretariat and govern staff expectations and behavior (Chwieroth 2008, 133; Nielson et al. 2006, 109). Similarly, organizational style is rooted in "behavioral routines which develop over time depending on factors like common professional beliefs and normative orientations of organizational staff (esprit de corps) as well as administrative perceptions of external challenges related to organizational fields" (Jankauskas et al. 2024, 1173).

The two most important sources of autonomy-generating organizational culture are also pertinent for specialized committees. *First*, organizational rules prescribe action for actors inside the organization, shape how they see the world and perceive the problems they face, and can be constitutive of the identity of an organization (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 18). Like international administrations, specialized committees are firmly embedded in organizational rulesets that define their composition and role in organizational decision-making (Bradley and Kelley 2008, 4–9). Their activities are constrained in numerous ways, including organizational purpose that emphasizes certain issues, for which the IO is invested with authority (Hooghe and Marks 2015, 311–312), fundamental organizational norms that indicate how organizational purpose should be pursued (Graham and Serdaru 2020, 680–682), and institutionalized decision criteria guiding follow-up decisions (Gehring and Vizitiu 2024). Of particular importance for the argument of this paper are constraints arising from the delimitation of their specific mandates. *Second*, shared professional beliefs and common experience of international civil servants shape the collective understanding of their mandate and the ways to achieve it (Chwieroth 2008, 133–135, Jankauskas et al. 2024, 1173). Likewise, specialized committees are typically attended by lower-level civil servants with task-specific experience and shared professional beliefs (Haftel and Thompson 2006, 258–259).

Taken together, organizational rules and shared beliefs of the people driving organizational decisions may create a distinct organizational logic of appropriateness according to which IO decisions are made. Relevant sources of organizational autonomy do not only pertain to international administrations and their civil servants, but also to specialized committees and their members, even if representing member state governments. In the following, we develop a rational institutionalist theoretical account of how assigning the preparation of decision proposals to specialized committees is likely to create an organizational logic of appropriateness that affects activities of member states and their representatives in IO bodies and exerts systematic influence on organizational decisions.

2.2 | Functionally Differentiated IO Decision-Making

To explicate our theory, we focus on a basic two-body constellation, in which the supreme IO membership body retains final decision-making power, but assigns preparatory functions to a specialized committee, which is composed of all IO members (committee of the whole, Conrad and Monroe 2021, 608) and decides by consensus. Despite considerable variation in committee tasks, composition, and decision procedures, this setting is widespread in existing IOs (see Section 3). It provides a distinct institutional response to the governor's dilemma (Abbott et al. 2020) that allows integrating expertise into the organizational decision process without empowering non-state institutional actors. Moreover, it is least likely to produce committee effects because these effects cannot arise from more specific committee characteristics, such as modified decision quorums (e.g., majority voting), different compositions (e.g., comprising only a sub-set of IO members or independent experts), or assignment of final decision-making power to committees, all of which are likely to increase committee influence. A committee is specialized if it prepares organizational decisions on only a subset of organizational tasks, while the supreme membership body is generally responsible for all tasks. To identify organizational effects of assigning preparatory activities to IO committees, we assume that committee members represent the preferences of their states or state agencies sincerely, rather than pursuing predominantly their own (expert) interests.

Principal-agent theory adopts a hierarchical perspective (Hawkins et al. 2008; Nielson and Tierney 2003) and does not expect significant effects. Supreme membership bodies (MBs) are superior to specialized committees (SC). They are in full control of the decision process because they retain final decision-making power (Figure 1). While committees fulfill auxiliary functions as their agents (Bradley and Kelley 2008; Green and Colgan 2013), the setting does not entail information asymmetries and goal conflicts between IO bodies (Lake 2007, 231–233), because both bodies are composed of member state representatives.

In contrast, the functional differentiation perspective adopted in this article is non-hierarchical. It conceives of the constellation as a multi-stage decision process with two horizontally arranged IO bodies (Conrad and Monroe 2021). Each of these bodies fulfills specific functions and contributes separately to the final decision. Organizational effects arise from interactions between them. If the committee is preoccupied with tasks that cannot be accomplished (sufficiently well) by the supreme membership body, it tacitly changes the role of the supreme membership body in the decision process. When submitting proposals based on convincing (unchallenged) expertise, the supreme membership body can concentrate on other tasks, especially assessing whether the distributive consequences of these proposals are acceptable for IO member states. Because of their different but complementary functions, the two bodies

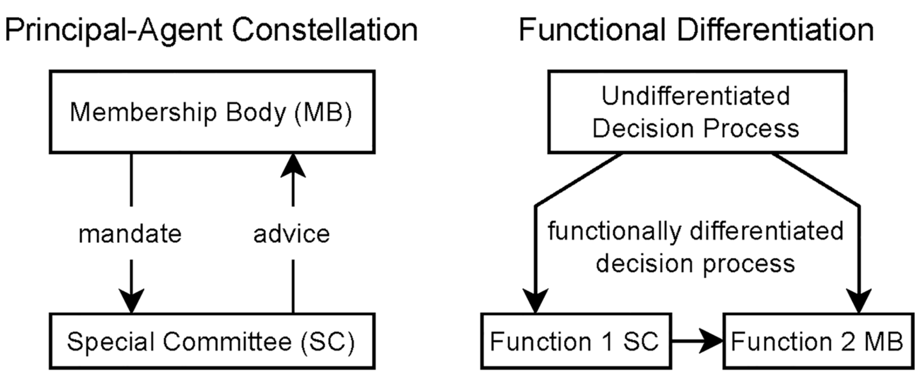


FIGURE 1 | Stylized models of P-A constellation and functional differentiation in international organizations.

are likely to develop distinct rationales. Accordingly, we investigate the resulting implications for preparatory committees and the supreme membership bodies separately.

2.3 | The Decision-Making Rationale of Specialized Committees

The core characteristic of committees is *task specialization*. Committees typically address a subset of issues dealt with by the IO, delimited by their mandate. Task specialization is the opposite of issue-linkage, a strategy often used to expand opportunities for cooperation by forming mutually beneficial package deals. It detaches committee tasks from tasks dealt with by other IO bodies. The set of relevant issues defines the negotiation space (Sebenius 1983)—alongside membership, which we assume to be fixed. It shapes and constrains opportunities for offers and demands and affects the win-set, that is, the zone of possible agreement (McKibben and Western 2014). Accordingly, IO members face a smaller negotiation space in the committee than in the supreme membership body. The limited potential for mutually beneficial package deals reinforces the relevance of other ways to reach an agreement.

Task specialization promotes *actor specialization*. IO members are generally free to choose their representatives in IO bodies but have a strong incentive to be represented in committees by experts. Experts are persons with expertise in the sub-set of issues dealt with by the committee (Ambrus et al. 2014, 12). This includes lower-level civil servants of IO member states. In specialized committees, experts promise to advocate the interests of their member states better than generalists because they have a better understanding of underlying problems and can better evaluate the consequences of available policy options and tabled proposals. The more other IO members are represented by experts, the less likely a non-expert representative can positively influence committee negotiations. Accordingly, task-specialized committees tend to become expert bodies. Actor specialization results from the self-selection of representatives by IO member states and their intention to promote their interests best; it does not presuppose that member states sacrifice pursuing their preferences. It is known from parliamentary committee systems, where "members from farming districts dominate agriculture committees and (...) members from urban districts sit on banking, urban, and welfare committees" (Weingast and Marshall 1988, 148).

Actor specialization allows committees to draw on *expert knowledge and shared beliefs* to achieve agreement. Professional standards and other forms of expert knowledge are not only a source of influence of international civil servants (Littoz-Monnet 2017, 2); they also characterize transnational networks of governmental experts (Keohane and Nye 1974; Slaughter 2005, 36–64) and epistemic communities (Haas 1992). The availability of shared expertise is not a socialization effect, but an immediate consequence of the relative homogeneity of committee members. It provides common points of reference when collectively appraising divergent positions and accommodating state preferences (Haas 2014, 29–30). It helps appraise available options and identify technically appropriate solutions. Incompatible claims are more easily sorted out because they are collectively identified as promoting technically inappropriate, illegal, or impracticable solutions or because similar solutions are known to have failed in the past.

Hence, expert committee members do *not only* advocate the divergent preferences of their respective IO members and engage in distributive bargaining. They *also* tend to identify solutions that are compatible with shared expert knowledge (Krehbiel 1992). Their agreed proposals tend to be in line with shared expertise because committee members, as a group, are unlikely to agree on proposals that violate shared beliefs and professional standards. Consequently, specialized committees redefine and limit the win-set (zone of possible agreement) to solutions that are compatible with shared beliefs and professional standards (technically appropriate solutions). Committee members (and their member states) with preferences outside the range of technically appropriate solutions can either compromise or adjust their preferences according to new knowledge (Grobe 2010); or they block agreement on the entire committee proposal or on selected provisions—and assign settlement of the remaining conflict to the superior membership body. Disputed provisions in an otherwise agreed proposal often appear "in brackets."

In short, specialized committees are likely to develop distinct logics of appropriateness based on their comparatively homogeneous composition and shared expertise. Even if composed of governmental representatives from all IO members, they tend to address contentious issues from an expert perspective and push agreement toward technically appropriate solutions. Like congressional committees (Krehbiel 1992, 5), they capture collective gains from mobilizing expertise while minimizing the degree to which their proposals deviate from IO member preferences. This effect does not presuppose that committee members are socialized into a community of committee members and partially disregard the preferences of their respective member states as assumed by sociological accounts of committee influence. It may be triggered solely by task specialization of committees, which promotes actor specialization and enmeshes committee members in the constraints of shared expertise when preparing proposals. It will be particularly important in highly specialized committees dealing with narrowly defined tasks, while committees addressing a broad range of issues will be less affected.

2.4 | The Decision-Making Rationale of Supreme Membership Bodies

Supreme membership bodies are responsible for a wide range of IO-related issues and have final decision-making power. They are not task-specialized and are typically composed of high-level representatives without the expertise of committee members. Accordingly, the distributive effects (costs and benefits) of proposals and the distribution of bargaining power among member states, including voting rights, not expertise, provide the common point of reference.

Committee proposals influence negotiations in the supreme membership body because they set the agenda. While IO committees rarely have formal or exclusive agenda-setting rights, their proposals provide focal points around which expectations about negotiation outcomes can converge (Snidal 1985, 931–936). Faced with a committee proposal, negotiators are not in an unstructured bargaining process anymore but appraise the benefit of agreeing on the proposal against the costly alternative of cumbersome and time-consuming negotiations. Within the range of generally acceptable solutions, it will be difficult to move the point of agreement in either direction because gains of one side are typically mirrored by losses of the other side. Therefore, well-elaborated proposals tend to be accepted and keep IO decisions within the range of technically appropriate solutions, as defined by the preparatory committee. Empirical observations support this conclusion. Scholars of legislative processes emphasize the influence of agenda-setters on bargaining constellations in the US Congress (Martin 2014; Conrad and Monroe 2021, 610–611) and in the EU (Pollack 2003, 48–56). The Council of the European Union adopts many committee proposals without discussion (Häge 2013) and member state bodies of traditional IOs, such as the International Monetary Fund, rarely change proposals submitted by secretariats (Martin 2006).

The supreme membership body is likely to reject committee proposals or reopen negotiations under two conditions. *First*, it will not simply accept contested committee proposals. If a proposal has received only majority support, the overridden minority is likely to reject it, thus reopening negotiations. Accordingly, specialized committees have an incentive to ensure that their results are difficult to challenge. *Second*, single IO members may reject proposals if they perceive them as violating strong preferences *and* if they prefer blockade to agreement. This is more likely on issues with strong distributional conflict (Pollack 2003, 52). Accordingly, preparatory committees can reinforce their relevance by accommodating IO member preferences with professional standards rather than merely searching for technically optimal solutions.

Committee preparations may even influence negotiations on unsettled issues because they affect the distribution of power among IO members with a general interest in the cooperation project at stake. These IO members prefer agreement over non-agreement but differ regarding the precise solution; they are in a coordination situation with distributive effects (battle-of-the-sexes, Snidal 1985, 931–936). Sufficiently well-advanced committee proposals with only a few bracketed (i.e., contentious) clauses intervene in the formation of coalitions and the distribution of power. If they point at one solution as particularly appropriate, they transform an otherwise symmetrical constellation of IO members with divergent preferences into an asymmetrical one, in which one group advocates the organizationally desired solution, while another one struggles against this solution and is forced to openly pursue parochial interests. Accordingly, IO members with low-intensity preferences on the contentious issue get an incentive to support the former group. If the latter group cannot expect to prevail, compromising becomes the rational option to avoid non-agreement as the least preferred outcome. Empirical evidence supports the expectation that consensual knowledge may overcome "lowest common denominator" bargaining (Zaun 2016), although it does certainly not always determine outcomes.

To conclude, assigning the preparation of IO decisions to specialized committees is an important source of IO autonomy. These committees introduce shared expertise into the IO decision process as a second common point of reference alongside cost-benefit-related preferences and the distribution of power among IO members. They push proposals toward the technically appropriate, thus creating an effect that is often attributed to IO secretariats. Committee proposals set the agenda of the supreme decision-making body and provide focal points that are difficult to modify and, therefore, keep IO decisions close to the technically appropriate. This effect originates from a distinct institutional arrangement that separates the functions of preparation and final decision-making, not from individual predispositions or altruistic behavior of member state representatives. It has escaped both sociological and rational institutionalist approaches to committees.

3 | The Institutional Prerequisites of Committee-Based Organizational Autonomy

Is the theoretical causal mechanism developed above likely to be activated in existing IOs? Given the diversity of IO bodies this is certainly not the case for every single committee. To explore the relevance of the causal mechanism for existing IOs and elucidate some important scope conditions, we investigate the institutional prerequisites and their presence in a sample of IOs with little delegation to secretariats. For an assessment of actually realized committee effects, we refer to Section 4.

3.1 | Three Institutional Prerequisites of Committee-Based Organizational Autonomy

Three prerequisites are indispensable to activate the causal mechanism developed above: Committees must be characterized by *task specialization* and *actor specialization* compared to the final decision-making body, and they must fulfill a conducive *committee function* in the functionally differentiated organizational decision process.

1. *Task specialization* constitutes the starting point of the causal mechanism. A committee dealing with a narrowly defined subset of IO issues is more likely to develop a distinct rationale than a body addressing a broad set of issues. Task specialization can be assessed according to the number of tasks fulfilled by a committee. Five tasks capture core activities of IO bodies and can readily be identified, namely scientific-technical, monitoring and compliance, resource allocation, internal affairs, and external governance. Committees dealing with a single task, especially one of the three former ones, are more prone to activating the mechanism than those addressing several tasks or the cross-cutting tasks of internal affairs and external governance. Accordingly, a highly task-specialized EU Council working group is more likely to activate the causal mechanism than the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER), that deals with all Council issues alike (Lewis 2003, 999–1001).
2. *Actor specialization* is another indispensable committee characteristic for activating the causal mechanism. The more a committee is composed of experts, the more it can draw on shared beliefs and professional standards and

mitigate the exclusive focus on the distribution of preferences and power among the member states. Following Haftel and Thompson (2006, 258, 259), we assess actor specialization as the distance of individual committee members from the top level of IO member states and organizations. The causal mechanism centers around committees composed of lower-level civil servants of all (or, by extension, a subset of) IO member states because their members are likely to adopt an expert perspective on pending issues without ignoring member state preferences. In contrast, committees comprising top-level representatives of all or a subset of IO member states are unlikely to trigger the causal mechanism because ministers, high-ranking ministerial officials, or central bank directors are generalists, not experts on negotiated issues. Likewise, committees composed fully or partially of individuals not representing IO members, for example, some science committees, are less likely to trigger the causal mechanism because they are not designed to accommodate expertise with preferences.

3. *Committee function* refers to the role of a committee in the IO decision process according to the division of labor between the committee and its supreme membership body. The causal mechanism developed above applies only to committees that prepare IO decisions and therefore have the power to set the agenda for final decision-making (Pollack 2003, 48–56). We assess the function of a committee based on its formal competencies according to its constitutive document. The theoretical account refers to preparatory committees with informal agenda-setting power, implying that the final decision-making body can also decide without such proposals or deviate from them. Preparatory bodies may also have formal agenda-setting power, like some committees of the International Organization of Pension Supervisors (IOPS) and some compliance committees of multilateral environmental agreements. These committees can make even more compelling proposals because the recipient body cannot decide without a committee proposal. Yet other committees are less likely to trigger the causal mechanism. Administrative bodies like the "bureaus" of superior IO bodies have merely an organizational role and do not provide substantive policy input. Advisory committees that elaborate scientific or technological advice without preparing decision proposals do not trigger the mechanism because they do not set the agenda of the supreme decision-making body. Their advice is at risk of not being taken seriously by supreme membership bodies (Andresen 2014, 120). Finally, committees with decision-making power like EU comitology committees (Blom-Hansen and Brandsma 2009) or the executive board of the Green Climate Fund of the UNFCCC (Gehring and Vizitiu 2024) operate post (not pre) policy agreement according to a completely different causal mechanism.

We assess committee characteristics across IOs with our original dataset Global Regulatory Organizations (GloReg), which comprises 20 IOs from two policy fields. Ten IOs are from global financial market regulation, a policy field dominated by IOs that are not based on formal international treaties and provide the blueprint for the debate on informal IOs (Vabulas and Snidal 2013; Roger 2020, 28, 29). The dataset includes public IOs established by states like the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) or by state agencies like the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision (BCBS), and semi-private IOs with a public component like the International Financial Reporting Standards Foundation (IFRSF). It also contains ten organizational components of multilateral environmental agreements, for example, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change with its Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement. This policy field is populated by the free-standing organizational components of multilateral environmental agreements, which are less formal than traditional IOs despite their foundation in formal treaties (Churchill and Ulfstein 2000). Table 1 lists the IOs of the dataset and shows that all of them comprise a set of organizational bodies beyond the secretariat. In exceptional cases, IOs may comprise more than a single supreme membership body, for example, the UNFCCC with its separate supreme bodies for the Convention, the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement, and the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) with its two chambers.

These IOs provide an ideal ground to probe our proposed theory of committee-based IO autonomy because they tend to have no or only very small secretariats. They are unlikely to gain significant autonomy through delegation, the mechanism on which the literature has focused so far. They represent important types of IOs that can significantly influence world politics in their respective areas. For example, the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision issues formally non-binding but practically highly influential banking regulation rules (Basel I–IV). Likewise, the Meeting of the Parties of the Montreal Protocol can tighten certain emission limits for ozone-depleting substances through legally binding "adjustments," exercise compliance control, and impose trade restrictions on non-compliant states. Ultimately, however, the causal mechanism is likely to matter for both IOs with or without capable secretariats.

For the purpose of this paper, we record permanent non-secretariat bodies that existed in the year 2017 and have a mandate arising either from an IO's constitutional documents or from other documents, such as the rules of procedure or decisions of supreme IO bodies. This excludes temporarily established ad-hoc bodies and subcommittees of subsidiary bodies, which would artificially inflate the number of bodies.

3.2 | The Presence of Institutional Prerequisites for Committee-Based Organizational Autonomy

The institutional prerequisites for triggering the causal mechanism are widely present in the IOs of our sample, and the institutional characteristics of committees differ widely from those of supreme membership bodies.

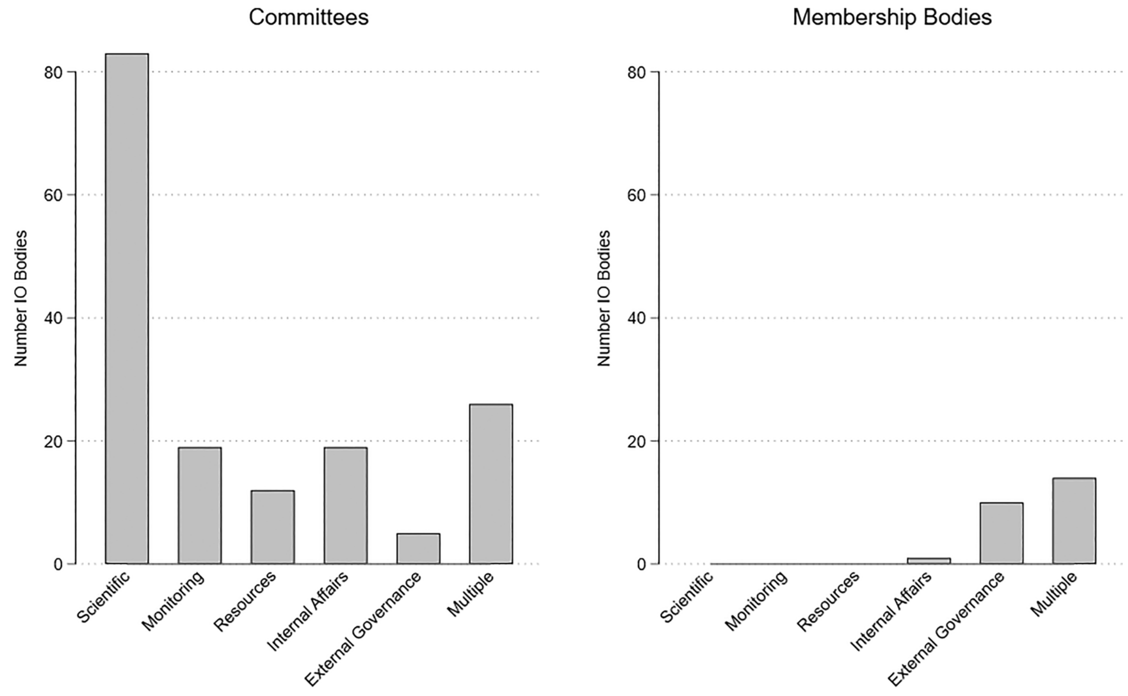
First, committees of the 20 IOs examined are *highly task-specialized* and tend to focus on technical tasks, whereas supreme membership bodies are generally responsible for a broader range of issues and focus on cross-cutting tasks (Figure 2). By far, most committees deal with a single task, while only a few address two

TABLE 1 | Twenty IOs from Financial Market Regulation and Environmental Governance.

Name	Short name	Founding year	Supreme membership bodies	Committee bodies
		Environmental Organizations		
Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora	CITES	1973	1	4
Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals	CMS	1979	1	3
Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer and Montreal Protocol on Substances That Deplete the Ozone Layer	Ozone	1985	2	10
Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal	BC	1989	1	4
Convention on Biological Diversity, including Cartagena and Nagoya Protocols	CBD	1992	1	9
Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic	OSPAR	1992	1	9
Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade	PIC	1998	1	2
International Whaling Commission	IWC	1946	1	4
United Nations Convention on Climate Change, including Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement	UNFCCC	1992	3	16
Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution, including protocols	LRTAP	1979	1	12
		Financial Organizations		
International Association of Deposit Insurers	IADI	2002	1	14
Basel Committee on Banking Supervision	BCBS	1974	1	6
International Organization of Securities Commissions	IOSCO	1983	1	15
Financial Action Task Force	FATF	1989	1	6
International Association of Insurance Supervisors	IAIS	1994	1	22
Financial Stability Board	FSB	1999	1	6
International Organization of Pension Supervisors	IOPS	2004	1	2
International Financial Reporting Standards Foundation	IFRSF	2001	2	3
Bank of International Settlements	BIS	1930	2	16
International Federation of Accountants	IFAC	1977	2	11

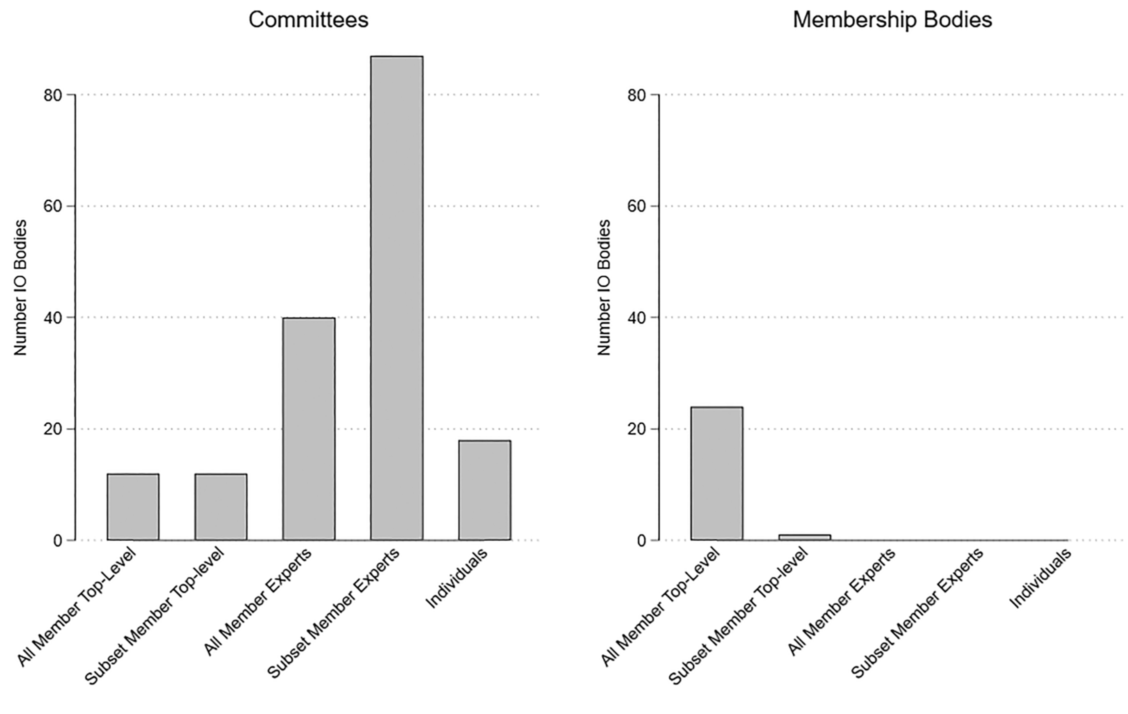
or more tasks (multiple). More than half of all committees are exclusively occupied with scientific or technical issues. Together with committees focusing on monitoring, compliance, and resource allocation, they have a particularly high potential to trigger the causal mechanism compared to the relatively few committees with multiple functions or focusing on internal affairs or external governance issues. For supreme membership bodies, the picture is completely reversed. Almost all supreme membership bodies fulfill either multiple tasks or solely external governance tasks. They are less likely to develop a rationale based on professional consensus and common experience.

Second, in contrast to supreme membership bodies, most IO committees also display a high level of *actor specialization* that increases the professional homogeneity of committee members and fosters their ability to draw on shared expertise and



Plots 189 different IO Bodies across their mandated tasks.

FIGURE 2 | Task specialization of committees compared to membership bodies.



Plots 194 different IO Bodies across the type of individual members.

FIGURE 3 | Actor specialization of committees compared to membership bodies.

professional standards (Figure 3). While supreme membership bodies are throughout composed of top-level representatives, more than two-thirds of the committees in our sample are composed of expert representatives from all or a subset of IO members and can be expected to trigger the causal mechanism. Two other types of committees are less likely to activate the mechanism. About 10% of all committees are composed of independent experts that can provide more independent advice, but are not designed to accommodate expertise with member state preferences. The low share of independent expert bodies is in line with research on European Union committees (Blom 2021, 28) and demonstrates that committee governance does not predominantly undermine IO member state representation. Likewise, less than 20% of committees are composed of top-level representatives from all or a subset of IO member states. These committees are not actor specialized and lack an important prerequisite for producing committee influence according to the causal mechanism. They occur primarily in the field of global financial market regulation, such as the subcommittees of the BCBS, and may reflect the intention to reinforce the weight of committee activities of informal IOs that cannot adopt formally binding decisions.

Third, IO committees exercise systematically different functions in IO decision processes than supreme membership bodies (Figure 4) and thus foster functional differentiation between IO bodies. By far, most committees fulfill advisory or preparatory functions in the IO decision process, with advisory bodies often fulfilling informal preparatory tasks as well. Few committees have formal agenda-setting power. Hence, most committees reflect the assumptions of our theoretical discussion in Section 2. They are part of functionally differentiated decision processes, in which the stages of advice/preparation and decision-making are assigned to different bodies. In contrast to committees, supreme membership bodies fulfill almost exclusively decision-making functions, which are complementary to committee functions. Only about 10% of all committees have final decision-making power. Like EU comitology committees, they are part of functionally differentiated decision processes, but operate according to a completely different causal mechanism based on already adopted legal acts or agreed policy documents.

The prerequisites for the theoretical causal mechanism of committee influence on IO decisions are widely present in the IOs of our sample. Committees are generally embedded in functionally differentiated IO decision processes. Most of them are highly task-specialized and focus mainly on technical issues such as scientific-technical, monitoring and compliance, or resource allocation, whereas supreme membership bodies typically address a broader set of tasks or concentrate on cross-cutting tasks, such as external governance. Most committees are predominantly composed of governmental experts from IO members, while supreme membership bodies are composed throughout of top-level representatives. Moreover, most committees tend to fulfill advisory or preparatory functions, whereas most supreme membership bodies have final decision-making power. There is no indication that this empirical constellation is specific to our particular sample.

4 | Committee-Driven IO Autonomy in Practice: The OSPAR Decision to Designate a New Marine Protection Area Beyond National Jurisdiction

A case study of the recent important OSPAR decision to designate a new marine protection area beyond national jurisdiction illustrates the operation of the theorized causal mechanism. It demonstrates that assigning preparatory functions to expert committees composed of governmental representatives can actually shape IO decisions beyond pure preference aggregation. The case was selected as a typical one, that is, the independent variable and the dependent variable covary in the way our causal mechanism predicts. We use process tracing to reveal how the independent variable, that is, preparation of an IO decision by a specialized committee composed of governmental experts, is connected with the dependent variable, that is, a final decision that follows committee advice and differs from the typical outcome expected from intergovernmental bargaining processes. Documents are from www.OSPAR.org.

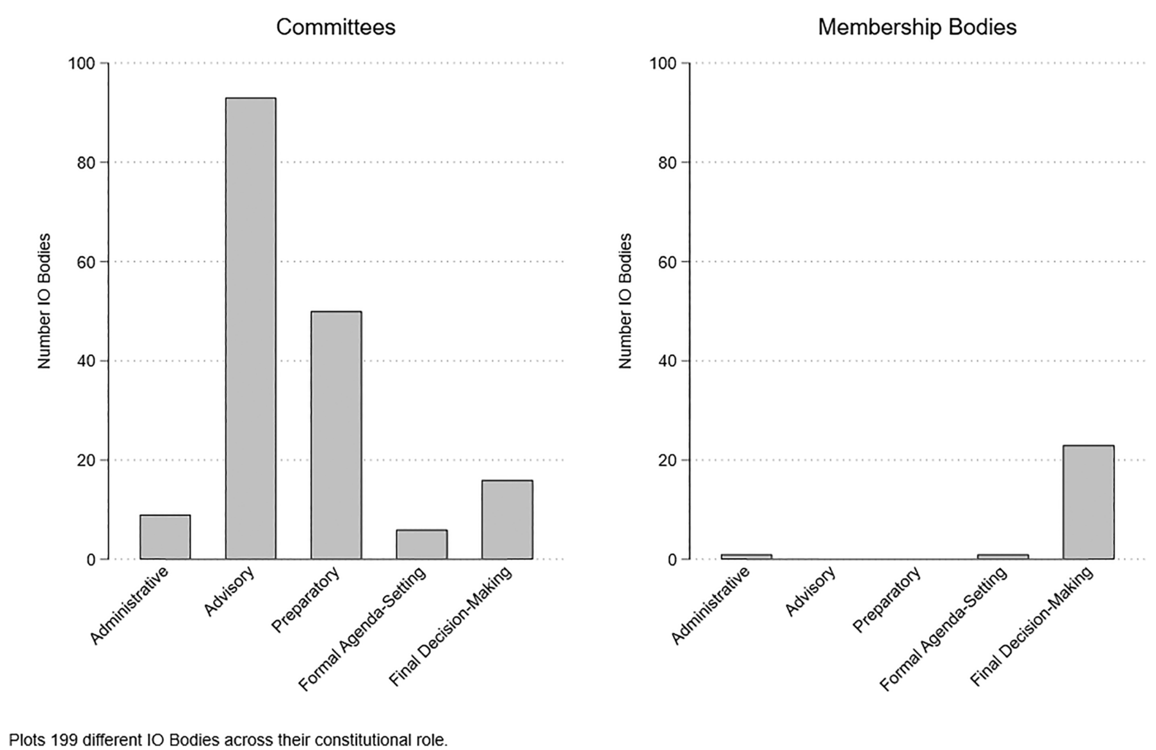


FIGURE 4 | Function of committees compared to supreme membership bodies.

OSPAR manages activities of its 15 West European member states and the European Union under the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic of 1992. The OSPAR Commission is the supreme decision-making body, composed of high-level representatives from all member states. It can adopt Decisions that are binding on all member states that have not opted out and Recommendations that constitute formally non-binding soft law (Convention, art 13). It comprises several specialized committees dealing with specific topics like biodiversity and hazardous substances and some cross-cutting bodies like the Heads of Delegation committee, and has only a tiny servicing secretariat of currently 14 staff.

The OSPAR decision to designate a Marine Protection Area for the North Atlantic Current and Evlanov Sea basin (NACES-MPA) was prepared without significant influence from the secretariat by a specialized committee and an even more specialized sub-committee, both of which were composed of expert representatives from all member states. Despite considerable divergence of preferences and lasting conflict, it was eventually unanimously adopted by the OSPAR Commission as the supreme membership body. Hence, the decision process was functionally differentiated. The NACES-MPA is located in areas beyond national jurisdiction outside the territorial waters of coastal states, their adjacent exclusive economic zones, and additional continental shelf claims. It covers an international conservation area of about 600.000 km^2, more than the size of France, halfway between the Azores and the Southern tip of Greenland around the mid-Atlantic mountain ridge. This high seas area is an important foraging place for seabirds due to its rich marine wildlife and low economic activity (OSPAR 2020). So far, no other IO has established similar MPAs in marine areas beyond national jurisdiction, except for the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (Davies et al. 2021, 3, 4). This might change in the future under the global Agreement on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction, adopted in June 2023 (Klerk 2023).

The *Intersessional Correspondence Group on Marine Protection Areas (ICG-MPA)* investigated the merits of designating the new MPA and elaborated an extensive evaluation document (the "nomination proforma," OSPAR 2020). It is a subcommittee of the Biodiversity Committee (BDC). Its members, mid-level governmental marine experts mostly from marine protection agencies of the member states, discussed the project intensely in 2016 (ICG-MPA 16/9/1-E, 5.3-5.6) and in 2017 (ICG-MPA 17/9/1-E, 4.7-4.14). The initiative to designate a new MPA had been submitted by BirdLife International, a non-governmental organization with observer status at OSPAR that conducts a long-term program identifying Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (Waliczky et al. 2019). Through satellite tracking of thousands of seabirds, scientists discovered a hotspot area in the Atlantic used by millions of seabirds from numerous colonies (Davies et al. 2021). The subcommittee gathered comments from member states and from IOs regulating shipping, fishing, and other maritime activities. Eventually, it forwarded the "nomination proforma" to the BDC. Superior bodies played a subordinate role in the early preparation phase. Without substantive discussion, the OSPAR Commission mandated the Biodiversity Committee in 2017 to finalize the scientific evaluation (OSPAR 17/19/1, Annex 10). The BDC emphasized "that it is the responsibility of ICG-MPA to ensure that the proposal is sufficiently mature before it is brought forward to BDC" (BDC 17/10/1, 5.16).

Based on the "nomination profoma," the *Biodiversity Committee* elaborated the regulatory measures for the proposed MPA. It is one of six standing sectoral OSPAR committees with a focus on marine biodiversity issues and comprises mid-level governmental representatives of member states from pertinent sections of national environmental ministries and specialized agencies. In 2018, 2 years after the submission of the initiative, it unanimously approved the robustness of scientific findings and the need for increased protection of the area (BDC 18/10/1, 6.9–6.20). In 2019, it discussed conservation measures intensely (BDC 19/11/1-E, 5.7–5.15) and established a Task Force to elaborate decision proposals. In 2020, it forwarded proposals for a decision establishing the NACES-MPA and a recommendation outlining protection measures (BDC 20/7/1-E, Annex 5). The OSPAR Commission did not address the details at this point. In 2018, it discussed the initiative and instructed the Task Force and the Biodiversity Committee to carry on with their work and conduct an extensive consultation process with relevant parties (OSPAR 18/20/1, 8.14). However, it identified the designation of the NACES-MPA as an important deliverable for an upcoming session of the OSPAR Commission meeting at the ministerial level (OSPAR 19/20/1-E, 10.22).

All but one single issue, namely the vertical delimitation of the MPA, could be settled by the specialized committees. Several member states advocated to include the seafloor in the MPA (ICG-MPA 18/9/1 4.8). France, Germany, Portugal, and the Netherlands, states with less immediate economic interests in the NACES-MPA area, emphasized conservation objectives and the need to protect the entire ecosystem including the seabed (BDC 19/11/1, 5.11). Some other countries, especially Denmark (with Greenland), Iceland, and Norway, struggled against limitations of their ability to exploit the seabed economically. They emphasized that protection should focus on the uppermost parts of the water column as the ecosystem of importance for the seabirds (ICG-MPA 18/9/1 4.8). They also advocated the "adjacency principle," which implies that coastal states bordering the proposed MPA should have special rights even beyond their exclusive economic zones and extended continental shelf claims (BDC 18/10/1, 6.12–6.13). In 2019, Norway and Iceland admitted that there was an ecological connection between the seafloor and the water column as described in the "nomination proforma" but claimed that this connection was not clear enough to warrant including the seafloor in the MPA (BDC 19/11/1, 5.11).

Expert representatives of Scandinavian countries blocked agreement on the contentious issue in the specialized committees. The ICG-MPA discussed the matter repeatedly and concluded in November 2018 that the Task Force should settle it (ICG-MPA 18/9/1-E, 4.8). The BDC decided in 2020 that "higher, political OSPAR levels make this decision" (BDC 20/7/1-E, 3.8.a). Accordingly, the proposals for a decision establishing the NACES-MPA and a recommendation outlining protection measures bracketed wording on the vertical delimitation of the MPA (BDC 20/7/1-E, Annex 5). The Heads of Delegation (HoD) committee, which comprises top-level member state representatives, was unable to solve the dispute in time for the 2020 session of the OSPAR Commission, thus underlining the intensity of the conflict. Eventually, the upcoming ministerial meeting of 2021 created sufficient political pressure on member states to agree on a compromise.

Bargaining theory would suggest an outcome at the "lowest common denominator." The constellation of member state preferences on the vertical delimitation of the NACES-MPA reflects a coordination situation with distributive effects (battle-of-the-sexes, Snidal 1985, 931–936). All member states agreed on designating the NACES-MPA to protect the marine environment (OSPAR 21/13/1-E, 6.4), but their preferences differed regarding the specific solution (including vs. excluding the seafloor). Bargaining theory holds that the proponents of the least far-reaching solution (i.e., those favoring exclusion of the seafloor) would prevail (Moravcsik 1998, 60–67), because they had institutional veto power and could block the agreement, given that OSPAR decisions need a high quorum and are typically taken by consensus.

In contrast, *the committee-driven IO autonomy perspective* emphasizes the effects of committee preparations reflected in the unanimously agreed "nomination proforma." The extensive document suggested protecting the ecosystem in the NACES-MPA area including both the water column and the seafloor. It was agreed by the IGC-MPA and provides the widely accepted scientific foundation for designing the new MPA. In a separate section, it emphasizes that different zones of the water column and the seafloor (benthos) are connected by biological processes (OSPAR 2020, 28–30). Life at the upper levels of the water column, on which protected seabirds rely, "is intrinsically linked to the deep-sea and the seafloor" (OSPAR 2020, 28). Sedentary species living in or on the seafloor are an essential part of the food chain, on which protected water birds depend (Sobrido-Prieto 2020, 448–450). Thus, committee preparations identified a technically appropriate and organizationally desired solution and transformed the otherwise symmetrical conflict between two groups of member states with divergent preferences into an asymmetrical conflict. They strengthened member states advocating the inclusion of the seafloor. Accordingly, countries advocating exclusion had to fight an uphill battle. Their preferences of claiming specific rights as coastal states with continental shelf claims bordering (not overlapping with) the envisaged MPA required *not* following the mutually agreed expert conclusions of the collective preparatory process.

At first glance, the negotiation outcome seemed to follow the bargaining logic fairly well. In 2021, the OSPAR Commission adopted OSPAR Decision 2021/01, formally establishing the MPA as submitted by the BDC but vertically limited to the water column, thus excluding the seabed, and Recommendation 2021/01 outlining regulatory measures for the new MPA. However, this was not the end of the story.

The final outcome corroborates the explanatory power of committee-based organizational autonomy. In 2021, the OSPAR Commission also adopted, as part of three inter-related documents, Agreement 2021-08 that established the explicit "intention by the OSPAR Commission to enhance the protection by including … the seabed, ocean floor and subsoil thereof" (emphasis added), and outlined a detailed roadmap for implementation until 2023. After another thorough scientific review of relevant information, the OSPAR Commission adopted, in 2023, Decision 2023/01 and Recommendation 2023/01, which revised the previous Decision and Recommendation and expanded the NACES-MPA vertically to the seafloor (OSPAR 23/17/1, 13.60). Neither the Agreement of 2021 nor the Decision and Recommendation of 2023 fit bargaining theory. However, they are fully in line with the committee-driven IO autonomy perspective.

The case shows how IOs may generate an organizationally produced logic of appropriateness by assigning preparatory activities to committees, even if these bodies are composed of member state representatives. The decision process was functionally differentiated. Specialized committees fulfilled the functions of evaluating the scientific merits of designating a new MPA and elaborating decision proposals, while the OSPAR Commission settled a final contentious issue and adopted the final decision. The committees developed an organizational perspective on the technically appropriate IO solution. Their conclusions were based on professional standards of marine science, not on aggregated member state preferences, as the struggle of some countries against the inclusion of the seafloor in the MPA demonstrates. Subsequently, committee preparations transformed the otherwise symmetrical conflict over the vertical delimitation of the MPA between two camps of states with divergent interests into an asymmetrical one between those supporting and those rejecting the technically appropriate and organizationally desired solution, thus influencing the distribution of power in the negotiations on the settlement of the final contentious issue. This transformation generated sufficient pressure to overcome preference-based resistance. It produced IO decisions that reflect committee-driven IO autonomy, while being difficult to explain by standard bargaining analysis.

5 | Conclusion

The theoretical causal mechanism developed in this article demonstrates how specialized committees may become a major source of IO autonomy, even if they are composed solely of member state representatives and have no final decision-making power. Assigning the preparation of IO decisions to such committees results in a division of labor among two or more IO bodies that fulfill complementary (i.e., separate) functions in the organizational decision process. Committees focusing on only a subset of issues pending in an IO tend to develop their distinct, expert-based rationales that arise from task specialization, which leads to increased homogeneity of committee members (actor specialization) and provides opportunities for accommodating divergent member state preferences with shared professional standards and common expertise. Proposals prepared by specialized committees tend to be accepted by supreme membership bodies because they provide strong focal points that are difficult to overcome within the limits of collectively acceptable outcomes. Consequently, the distinct expertise-based rationale of committee proposals is likely to prevail in final IO decisions as a consequence of a specific way of organizing IO decision processes.

Empirical evidence supports this claim. *First*, the institutional prerequisites for triggering the causal mechanism are present in our sample of IOs from global financial market regulation and environmental governance, and there is no reason to assume that this is specific to the particular sample. Most committees are highly task-specialized, that is, deal only with a subset of IO tasks with a focus on technical issues. Most of them are composed of lower-level civil servants from IO member states and state agencies. Hence, they are predominantly actor-specialized and provide opportunities for achieving agreement based on professional consensus and shared expertise alongside member state preferences. Most of them tend to fulfill advisory or preparatory functions that are complementary to the functions of supreme membership bodies. *Second*, a case study of a major OSPAR decision demonstrates that the committee preparation of IO decisions may actually result in final decisions that are difficult to explain by bargaining theory. A specialized committee composed of member state experts and an even more specialized subcommittee provided a technically appropriate and organizationally desired solution for designating a new marine protection area on the high seas that violated the preferences of some member states with the institutional power to block an agreement. The final decision reflects the committee's recommendation, not the aggregation of preferences.

The approach to committee-based organizational autonomy presented here overcomes several limits of prevailing committee governance scholarship. It attributes resulting organizational effects to the interaction of two or more IO bodies in functionally differentiated organizational decision processes, not to socialization and individual predispositions of committee members. In contrast to existing rational institutionalist analyses, it reveals the influence even of committees composed of member state representatives, although it is based on rational institutionalist assumptions. Of particular importance are *self-selection* effects that explain the relative homogeneity of the members of specialized committees and their ability to refer to shared expertise, and *agenda-setting* effects that explain why committee proposals tend to prevail in final decision-making. Hence, these committees should not be treated as miniature Councils or little Conferences of the Parties. In contrast to sociological institutionalist analyses, our approach can explain why specialized committees are likely to develop distinct rationales even without socialization effects and why their proposals influence final decision-making, even if diverging from the pure aggregation of member state preferences. Likewise, the approach specifies the institutional prerequisites under which a particular causal mechanism is likely to produce these effects. Thus, it points to differences between various types of IO committees. Specialized committees preparing IO decisions are likely to create committee influence according to the causal mechanism developed here. Activities of implementation committees like EU comitology committees and the boards of international financial institutions are likely to operate according to a completely different causal mechanism, because the underlying legal act or policy document provides a shared normative point of reference. Finally, committees without task specialization and resulting actor specialization, like the EU COREPER or the OSPAR Heads of Delegations committee, are less likely to create significant committee influence.

Our novel approach to committee influence sheds new light on the sources of IO autonomy as well. While IO theory attributes IO autonomy almost entirely to the independent activities of IO secretariats, not least by providing expertise that might deviate from established member state preferences, specialized IO committees can create similar effects on IO decisions and thus generate IO autonomy. Accordingly, informal IOs like the Basel Committee, international treaty management IOs like the organizational component of the UNFCCC, and other forms of IOs with weak or no secretariats might exercise political authority with a considerable degree of organizational autonomy, rather than being mere arenas for accommodating member state preferences. Similarly, the organizational autonomy of traditional IOs with extensive secretariats like the United Nations or the World Health Organization might not only arise from secretariat activities, as is frequently assumed, but can also originate from other sources, such as their specialized committees, even if these bodies are composed of member state representatives. Hence, the still predominantly bureaucracy-focused study of the sources of organizational autonomy should attribute closer attention to the precise role and effect of member state bodies in organizational activities.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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