

DEBATE

Political science and the epistemic foundations of transnational governance

Diane Stone 

Florence School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute, Italy
Email: diane.stone@eui.eu

(Received 2 September 2025 UTC; revised 27 April 2026 UTC; accepted 6 May 2026 UTC)

Abstract

Arising from the 2024 European Political Science (EPS) annual debate, this article examines the role of expertise in transnational governance (TNG) with a focus on political science. It explores how transnational governance reconfigures the spaces and contexts for expert engagements in global policy making and transnational administration. In these evolving spaces of jurisdiction, the democratic potential, accountability, and legitimacy of expert knowledge are not only shrouded from the Global Majority but cannot be assumed to be inevitable. The article outlines some meanings attached to TNG and suggests democratic considerations cannot be conceived or operationalised in the same ways as at nation-state levels of governance. First, TNG is a series of overlapping but fragmented transnational spheres of public sector activity as well as hybrid public-private jurisdictions where democratic principles are yet to be normalised and embedded. Second, the accountability and legitimacy of sources of expertise in the policy sectors of TNG can be counter-swayed by latent features of ‘epistocracy’, or expert rule, in transnational policy communities.

Keywords: epistocracy; political science; policy community; public sphere; transnational governance

Introduction

Problems trespass national sovereignty. Pandemics, financial crises, and climate degradation bypass state borders. Responses to these problems come from national governments. Yet policy initiatives are also driven by international organisations (IOs), public and private donor agencies, and often delegated to other transnational policy actors in the corporate world, civil society, and academia. In varying configurations, these actors and the experts who advise them create new modalities of ‘transnational governance’ – TNG.

The diverse structures of TNG draw upon individual experts and knowledge brokering organisations to inform policy design, monitoring, and implementation. Notwithstanding the retreat to nationalist-populist policy dynamics and geo-political strategies, problems continue to flow over borders, presaging cross-national responses not only from governments but also from IOs, the corporate world and global civil society.

For this European Political Science debate symposium, this article addresses how some forms of contemporary political and social science expertise generate understandings of transnational governance. While many maintain scholarly distance and eschew policy work, some experts seek to interpolate and engage TNG through their professional networks.

To write definitively about the role of ‘political scientists’ in TNG is problematic for three reasons. First, ‘political scientist’ is a fluid identity. Political economists, political sociologists, and political geographers, just to mention a few cognate titles, point to the interdisciplinary character of the political science profession.

Second, issues of governance are not addressed by ‘political scientists’ alone. Instead, they are only one part of the ‘mix’ of expertise in both transnational and national policy communities. The multi-dimensional and complex nature of global problems means that not only are most disciplines relevant in TNG, but also there are non-traditional sources of knowledge, as well as experiential knowledge gained through professional practice.

A third issue is that political scientists are not a homogeneous group. Political science is riven by a competition of ideas, different methodologies, varying epistemologies, and diverse analytical approaches. This plurality is generally deemed valuable. It leads to different assumptions and valorisations as to what constitutes impact, influence, or even the relevance of political science expertise. Different criteria also extend to the unit of analysis for gauging impact: individual political scientists, groups of them, or the entire profession. Any roundtable discussion, like the EPS debate, might also tend towards a ‘snapshot’ view of what is happening in the world today. This may overlook temporality in their impact and influence, such as the more subtle, longer-term relevance of political and other social scientists operating within policy communities.

This article has two themes. In the longer first part, it overviews the role of political science experts in global policy making and transnational administration. Experts are individual agents, but more importantly, as argued here, experts on governance, such as political scientists, are immersed in professional and scholarly bodies, in networks, coalitions, and social movements as well as transnational policy communities (Djelic and Quack 2010: 10). Rather than highlighting the impact or policy roles of individual agents like political scientists, their embeddedness in policy communities is stressed as crucial to influence in governance.

The second section turns to some questions that structured the EPS debate: ‘...how (can) expert advice and democratic accountability ... co-exist when multiple levels of governance should work together to respond to global challenges such as climate crisis or the fast-paced technological developments’. This section cautions on the prospect that political scientists help make transnational governance more transparent, accountable, and democratic. That is, in transnational spheres of governance, there is the dual prospect that experts will be (un)accountable and (il)legitimate, and it remains an open question whether the inclusion of experts in governance fuels epistocracy or democracy.

Transnational governance and expert engagements

Transnational (or global and regional) governance refers to the poly-centric rule-making, global policy processes, cross-border administrative interactions, and enforcement activities of governments and international organisations operating in conjunction with private actors in business, civil society, and academe in multi-scalar dynamics across city and local levels through national and international domains. In changing combinations, these actors shape norms and knowledge, rules and regulations around cross-border policy matters and global or regional ambitions in ways that are more-or-less authoritative. Sometimes in competition, other times in partnership, these actors manage diverse multi-jurisdictional, transboundary, and intergenerational policy problems.

It is decentralised and fragmented, with many different poles of activity of multi-level administration. TNG is constantly shifting like a *kaleidoscope* of changing actors and power constellations. Another metaphor is that TNG is like a ‘patchwork’ (Pouliot and Thérien 2023). TNG is based on provisional frameworks that are revised and refined based on learning from implementation, as well as by trial and error (Moloney 2021). TNG does not have the historically strong architectures of state authority with stable structures of law, government administrations,

or consolidated core institutions that are seen in most systems of centralised national government. By contrast, in TNG, policy making is poly-centric rather than state-centric (Stone 2019). The dispersion and delegation of power and authority in TNG, as well as the less institutionalised and more experimental or evolving character of TNG, means that democratic processes are poorly institutionalised.

There are overlaps in the phrases TNG and ‘global governance’. TNG is preferred here as the word ‘national’ is embedded in ‘transnational’ and is an important reminder of the centrality of the nation-state and continuing state sovereignty. The literature on transnationality (Tedeschi, Vorobeva and Jauhiainen 2022) also puts more emphasis on bottom-up initiatives from society and non-state actors, not focusing solely on top-down global policy or elite venues of summitry and international organisations. Notwithstanding the importance of international law and treaty making, corporations like Google, Microsoft, and Amazon, private banks and other financial actors, private standard-setting bodies like International Organizations for Standardization (ISO), as well as civil society actors such as Médecins Sans Frontiers and Amnesty International or the large international philanthropic foundations, can differentially shape global policies through lobbying, setting industry standards or via control of critical resources.

Given the fragmented, informal, and less institutionalised features of TNG relative to the stronger state architecture and order of most nation-states, political scientists and policy experts may well be more impactful in certain domains and policy sectors of TNG than at national levels. Whether as critics or as collaborators and co-designers in the evolving milieux of global and regional policy making, many different expert actors and knowledge organisations ‘broker’ their science, models, or advice.

As the debate was convened in the Florence School of Governance, it is pertinent to question whether the numerous undergraduate and graduate degree programmes on globalisation and governance that have emerged; or if associations like the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA) or the Global Public Policy Network (GPPN) and others alongside graduate schools of governance and public policy (Hertie School, College of Europe, Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG), amongst others) indirectly inform TNG. They are not simply places for education. The concepts they develop, the research programmes investigating TNG and other forms of engagement with global policy making imbricate graduate schools as organisations in governance processes (even if only marginally) and socialise their students and their executive education participants into new understandings of governance that they then take into their careers. A few of these graduates will become future global policy makers, international regulators, and transnational administrators. Some of their thinking will have been forged by those who taught or trained them.

In this sense, political scientists – along with other social scientists and scholars in arts and humanities – can have a world-making capacity: they create the concepts and interpretative frameworks that sustain policy paradigms or construct critical perspectives of governance. Their works can also be ‘constructive’ in developing new understandings and visions of political space or jurisdiction, such as the foundational work that has gone into interpreting what ‘Europe’ means. The title of a recent book says it aptly: *Building Europe through Education: Building Education through Europe* (Coutaz and Paoli 2024).

The notion of ‘region’ is a socially constructed one built in an assemblage of social, economic, and political thinking. Another example of world making lies in a different region. In the past quarter-century, there has been a move from the regional *economic integration* understanding of the ‘Asia Pacific’ to the *geo-strategic securitised* notion of the ‘Indo-Pacific’.

This paradigmatic shift in policy language is not the brainchild of one person or a specific group of scholars. Instead, it is built on the collective endeavours of many – both scholars and policy makers – over decades. By the same token, the idea of the ‘transnational’ and its connection to governance is one that needs to be fashioned, interrogated, and imagined over the *longue durée*

so that the notion of *transnational governance* acquires political meaning and salience in transnational policy communities (Djelic and Quack 2010: 10).

‘Global thinkers’ and ‘transnational policy entrepreneurs’

A ‘power of ideas’ approach (e.g. Haang’andu and Béland 2020) points to the long-term influence of the culture(s) of scholarly debate that overflows into public discourse and indirectly shapes policy and political understandings of contemporary issues. Well-known thinkers that have captured the political imagination included people like Elinor Ostrom for her Nobel prize-winning work on ‘the commons’, informing debates about global public goods (see Brando et al. 2019, plus a critique in Pouliot and Thérien 2023). Donatella della Porta (2006) in Italy is known worldwide for her work conceptualising and interpreting dynamics in social movements, transnational activism, and global protest. David Held (2009) and John Dryzek (2006) are known beyond academia for their work on ‘cosmopolitan democracy’ and ‘global deliberative democracy’, respectively. In the past decade, the idea of ‘earth system governance’ and ‘planetary thinking’ (Biermann 2024; Nicolaidis 2024) has gained traction. These political scientists are not household names, but their ideas seep into public consciousness and policy thinking.

A few scholars operate as ‘transnational policy entrepreneurs’ engaging ‘the transnational’ as spheres for innovative policy ideas. Harvard scholar John Ruggie was not simply a theorist of global governance. He was a policy practitioner with the United Nations Secretariat, leading the design of the Global Compact and the development of global corporate social responsibility (Cornelius and Wallace 2023). Likewise, in the European context, former think-tanker and advisor to the European Commission’s External Action Service, Nathalie Tocci, was a ‘policy entrepreneur’ in the brokerage of the concept of ‘strategic autonomy’ (Veselinović 2024). Other examples abound of high-flying political scientists who have been advisors to IOs or major global civil society bodies.

Focusing on individuals such as those mentioned above loses sight of the networks and organisations that bolster their endeavours. These people spent much of their careers within universities. Their achievements were underpinned by this infrastructural support. Their ideas and analysis were broadcast and disseminated by their scholarly associations, research networks, conferences, journals, and publishing houses. But they were also buoyed by their colleagues with whom they worked and debated, their student engagements to test ideas, or their research environments and grants that allowed them to excel. A focus on individuals neglects the wider scholarly community that succoured their scholarship.

Highly recognised political scientists do help promote the discipline in an era where universities are increasingly being prevailed upon to demonstrate their worth to government paymasters and citizen taxpayers or, in other cases, their private and corporate benefactors. These themes are well noted in the preceding article by Imogen Bayley. Accordingly, this article turns its focus in a different direction – transnational spheres for democracy and governance – going beyond the methodological nationalism of ‘the international’ where the national state remains the primary if not sole unit of analysis.

Global, regional, or transnational governance is often conflated with the roles of international organisations and their relations with global civil society or multinational companies. However, new transnational jurisdictions of mixed or hybrid authority have emerged. Through their conceptual work as well as their professional interactions and consultancy work, social scientists are helping forge these ‘soft law’ regulatory domains in multi-stakeholder initiatives and transnational partnerships (like GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance), or private regimes (such as the Forestry Stewardship Council) that interact with traditional governance actors – states and international organisations.

Expert advice beyond the nation-state

While it is standard to have an image of IOs like the World Bank, the European Commission, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as powerful bodies, most IOs do not have extensive in-house policy analytic capacity. They need to collaborate with, co-opt, and contract external advisors and experts, as well as to commission analytic work.

The Group of 20 (G20) processes exemplify the demand for expertise. The G20 is a relatively young international organisation. More importantly, it is an *informal* IO – it doesn't have a treaty basis or a permanent secretariat; hence, it does not have an internal research or policy analytic capacity. Instead, the G20 relies on incorporating external advice through what it calls 'engagement groups': Science 20, Think Tank 20, Business 20, University 20, and so on (Pal 2023). Individual experts are incorporated, or actively seek entrance, into these G20 processes to inform trade or global finance issues, or other international political economy problems.

Even the IOs mentioned – the World Bank, the OECD, and the EU – have a mini galaxy of experts drawn into advisory roles from consultancies (Seabrooke and Sending 2020), think tanks (Veselinović 2024), and universities (Pal 2023). Moreover, these IOs cultivate 'knowledge networks' to provide information, evidence, and data, but also to present alternative or plural perspectives on policy issues which concurrently acts as a source of legitimization for these IOs (Stone 2019).

Global commissions of inquiry are generally established to bring in alternative advice and tackle questions of international import. For example, the Brundtland Commission (UN World Commission on Environment and Development) was a landmark initiative in raising public consciousness about the urgency of worldwide environmental degradation. The Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty was essential in embedding the norm of the 'Right to Protect' in world affairs (Cooper and English 2006). The legitimacy of these commissions came from two main sources: first, they were often established at the behest of an IO and a coalition of governments; second, authority was generated from the ex-prime ministers and presidents alongside the raft of experts appointed to the board or engaged in the deliberative work of these bodies.

These are organisations. But processes – like the now-extensive studies of policy transfer (Haang'andu and Béland 2020) – should not be overlooked. Many political scientists actively spread ideas and policy practices from one country or region to another through their consultancy work (Seabrooke and Sending 2020), think tank affiliations (Pal 2023), or involvement in other professional networks (Djelic and Quack 2010: 29–31).

Likewise, since the seminal joint report of the Royal Society and American Academy for the Advancement of Science in 2010, 'science diplomacy' has gained traction as a conceptual frame for science policy advice in TNG (Stone 2019). Both governments and IOs consult scientists in foreign policy, but also more generally to inform policy design, management, or the reforms of global or regional policy, regulatory standards, or multistakeholder initiatives by three different routes. First, *science in diplomacy* is when natural and social scientists contribute data, models, and evidence to address issues like climate change, disease control, and economic inequality. Knowledge is an input to decision-making. Second, *diplomacy for science* is the converse relationship where governments and IOs foster international scientific cooperation to advance innovation and research. A classic example is the Fulbright Fellowship scheme. In the EU context, the Horizon Europe research grant scheme and the funding support it has given to cultural and science diplomacy consortia (and other research projects) promotes transnational research collaboration. Third, *science for diplomacy* is where (social) scientists are more proactive and utilise their knowledge and scientific position to directly inform policy or to foster international understanding through research collaboration. (Social) scientists are more likely to act both transnationally and as entrepreneurs through their professional affiliations.

Private forums and civil society networks also give shape to TNG. Well-known knowledge brokering organisations include the World Economic Forum or groups of think tanks (like those located in Brussels orbiting the European Commission – e.g. the European Council on Foreign Relations or Centre for European Policy Studies – see Veselinović 2024). These are permanent entities that are distinguishable from other routes for political (and other social) science input to TNG. But even these private sector or civil society actors tend to be embedded in policy communities.

Transnational policy communities

Transnational policy communities form around a specific policy problem (like refugees or ocean pollution) or alternatively around a policy sector (like global health or global environmental policy). These transnational policy communities help compensate for the void of authority at global and regional levels where there are ‘non-jurisdictional spaces’ such as the oceans, the Antarctic, or global care chains (Djelic and Quack 2010; Stone 2019; Pouliot and Thérien 2023).

Communities can be characterised as cohesive and bounded groups of professionals from different countries who not only diffuse shared ideas and practices globally but also play informal regulatory roles via ‘soft law’ and standard setting, monitoring, and evaluation, and other implementation tasks specific to the field they operate in. The members of a transnational policy community are mixed: they are composed of international civil servants and government officials, but also leading private sector professionals with recognised authority and expertise in a specific policy sector or regulatory context. The cooperation between these private and public sector actors aids the stability and coherence of the management of the transnational policy issue or sector (Moloney 2021). There is a degree of longevity and policy continuity that evolves with the professional networking around maintaining the policy paradigm. Policy communities tend to be more open and pluralistic than ‘epistemic communities’ (Djelic and Quack 2010: 11). The latter are generally composed of scientists who share a specialisation with common causal knowledge and shared notions of validity (Larsen et al. 2026).

Policy communities are evident at national levels. However, the question to ask is: can they be more impactful in TNG than in national levels? Responses are likely to vary according to the political contestability of the policy issue or sector. For example, the groups of experts, policy communities, or networks surrounding the sustainable development goals are more open and transparent compared to technical protocols concerning cybersecurity cooperation or international finance. Alternative responses might focus on the institutional mechanisms – e.g. the absence of global or regional ‘policy advisory systems’ unlike those that form around government ministers and departments at a national level (Brans and Timmermans 2022).

Due to the recent nascence of institutional structures of TNG, there is a relative absence of accountability mechanisms. Administration is de-concentrated in the ‘patchwork’ of multi-stakeholder initiatives, international policy partnerships, or private regimes (Pouliot and Thérien 2023). Authority is dispersed and delegated (Moloney 2021). The growth of transnational governance innovations – private, public, and hybrid – generates new bureaucratic processes and regulatory logics in networked administrative spaces that are populated by a kaleidoscopic array of international civil servants and government officials aligned with policy entrepreneurial NGO advisors, global experts, consultants, and other professionals. In these milieux, whether experts are accountable or representative beyond their (oft self-proclaimed) epistemic authority is debatable. Even the idea of a global or ‘transnational public sphere’ is unformed. If experts are more ‘impactful’ in TNG, it does not entail that TNG is or will become more plural and participative, accountable, and democratic. The dividend of technical coherence, science-driven innovation, or effective evidence-based policy could just as likely contribute to democratic deficits.

An expert-Driven transnational public sphere? Democratic implications

This section makes two points. First, TNG policy processes and institutional arrangements are not necessarily becoming democratic. Second, the democratic credentials of ‘experts’ are not to be presumed. Instead, epistocracy can serve either democratic ambitions in TNG as much as bolstering illiberal or authoritarian norms or policy projects.

First, at least superficially, the diversity of actors in TNG makes global policy making seem open and pluralistic. Yet, the high costs (both financial and cognitive) of accessing the transnational domains of deliberation and decision-making are out of reach for the overwhelming majority of the world’s people. The decision-making opportunities in international summitry or diplomatic negotiations – which are most closely linked to nation-state architectures of representation – are generally closed to citizen participation or, at best, made transparent by the international media. The gaps – between the global majority of everyday rule-takers through to elite global-trotting rule-makers – are called the ‘global democratic deficit’ (Held 2009; also Dryzek 2006). For many, TNG is hazy, indistinct, and poorly understood. But for some, it is a new realm of public deliberation.

Political philosopher Nancy Fraser’s concept of a ‘transnational public sphere’ (2024) has been an important criticism of the commonplace idea that the public sphere is fastened into a nationally bounded political community. She sees a multiplicity of transnational ‘publics’ and ‘counter publics’, not unlike Della Porta’s focus on global civil society.

Consequently, boundaries between the public and private sectors are very blurred in TNG. Power is often pooled (in the resource interdependencies of global or regional networks), making transparency and accountability difficult to implement and enforce. The deconcentration and delegation of authority in new institutional tools and decision-making venues compound concerns about accountability and representation. Governing mechanisms do not necessarily rely on the power and authority of the state. Instead, new modes of authority arise from the *hybrid* interaction of a multiplicity of governing actors.

Moreover, certain transnational dynamics (around illegal immigration, money laundering, cybersecurity) could equally aggravate democratic deficits in national public administrations seeking to further consolidate executive power. The patchwork nature of TNG has ambiguous democratic effects – more voices and expertise are mobilised. However, inclusion is selective, authority is unevenly dispersed, and democratic accountability is thin (Pouliot and Thérien 2023). The requirements for becoming a transnational expert – such as having the resources for international mobility to gain international experience, the elite educational background, and plurilingualism – also shape patterns of social selection and opportunities to participate in TNG.

There are no ‘global citizens’ who can claim rights and responsibilities with global or transnational governing bodies. An authorising environment is almost non-existent in a world order structured by states. Citizenship is conferred by states while citizens think primarily in terms of their national identity – an ‘ontological nationalism’.

Even so, the certainties of citizenship are destabilised or at least questioned by the existence of European citizenship and the possibilities leading from ‘planetary thinking’ (Nicolaidis 2024). While ‘global citizenship’ is a very distant prospect, and for many a rather ‘woolly’ concept, nonetheless, the very idea interrupts our centuries-old tendencies towards ‘ontological nationalism’ that underpins the legal and institutional prioritisation of state sovereignty.

This idea of global citizenship, along with other (social) science ideas of ‘earth system governance’ (Biermann 2024) raises the prospect for alternative modes of theorisation and ‘world making’. Scholars in political science and international relations, policy studies, and public administration (as do other branches of social science) generate these evolving concepts, and some relate them to democratic theory and practice. Scholars and scientists are important in developing new imaginaries of transnational democracy.

However, their selective inclusion in global policy processes can cultivate a normative homogeneity where experts are coopted to help consolidate authority, or when (social) scientific knowledge is used to legitimise policy developments. Questions of accountability issues arise if expert elites live in their own world; that is, distant from ‘publics’ and de-linked from local communities. Critical expressions like ‘the Brussels bubble’ or ‘inside the Beltway’ (of Washington DC policy communities) capture the concern about unaccountable experts. If expert groups are central in shaping global policy but less constrained by accountability mechanisms in TNG, are there signs of epistocracy?

Epistocracy or not?

The short definition of epistocracy is ‘rule of the wise’. Instead of the ‘rule of the people’ as understood in democracy, epistocracy entails rule by the ‘knowers’ or ‘the educated’ (Jeffrey 2018; Lucky 2024). In epistocratic modes of governance, political power is exercised by those who possess knowledge that is relevant to good or sound policy making. However, the relevance of this concept to TNG is rarely considered.

Epistocratic tendencies can emerge in transnational policy communities – experts do not simply advise or provide knowledge inputs to the decision makers who are accountable. The concept of epistocracy helps get around the ontological distinction often made between the ‘the scholar and the policy practitioner’ that posits separate ‘worlds’ of knowledge creation and of politics and power.

Knowledge in governance is treated here as the consequence of bureaucratic socialisation, epistemic interpretation of problems, and professional networking. Policy making and knowledge creation are mutually created or co-constructed through (transnational) policy community interactions (Djelic and Quack 2010; Haang’andu and Béland 2020). For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is a nodal institution in the climate transnational policy community. Climate scientists are at the core of this intergovernmental body. Authority derives from the official appointment of the scientists by their member states but also from their scientific credentials, which give IPCC epistemic features (Larsen et al. 2026). This is a picture of transnational policy communities as semi-closed epistocratic domains of TNG.

Epistocracy entails more than regarding experts as neutral sources of evidence for policy making. Such experts do not simply provide knowledge inputs in a one-way transmission of knowledge to the doors of decision-making arenas, at which point their participation is halted. Scientists and scholars are not just wellsprings of information – ‘science on tap’ – to be turned on or off by international organisations and governments at will. Instead, scientific networks and expert communities play a critical role in the management of policy by defining the parameters of problems, setting agendas, and co-creating policy realities with their data and evidence, models and measures, theories and methodologies from problem definition through to monitoring and evaluating policy.¹ Expert professional advisors and (social) scientists might ‘rise to the top’ of their policy community, potentially limiting prospects for wider participation and deliberation from non-experts. To continue with the metaphor, this is the notion of ‘science on tap’ (Stone 2019).

An epistocracy taking over the management of a global policy sector is not evident. Expert groups, scientific networks, and other kinds of knowledge actors remain reliant on their relationships to centres of power at the nation-state level. Expert groups and scientific communities lack access to the public fisc. Nor do they have the public authority of either democratic or authoritarian political leaders. In environments of strong institutions, these leaders, bureaucrats,

¹**Difference between technocracy and epistocracy.** Technocrats have knowledge of the workings of governance, its internal dynamics and administrative processes. They are knowledgeable about how to make the ship of state operational. By contrast, epistocrats steer governance in specific directions towards desired (policy) destinations.

and other policy players (such as populist pressures) choke the prospects of fully fledged epistocracy at the nation-state level.

Moreover, the professional norms and research cultures of (social) science can present self-imposed restraints on epistocracy in transnational policy communities. Research ethics and standards on scholarly conduct embedded in higher education institutions, publishing houses, and grant schemes stipulate parameters for the 'engaged scholar', independence of thinking/advice and (in)appropriate proximity to the power of political scientists (and social scientists more generally). Potentially, political science pedagogy can promote policy sensitivity and responsiveness to local communities as an essential component of training for the transnational administrator based in bodies like GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance.

Epistocratic tendencies in TNG are not necessarily incompatible with democracy. There are ways to democratise expertise through what political philosopher Anne Jeffrey (2018) calls 'limited epistocracy'. This framework seeks to reconcile the efficiency dividend and technical competence brought by experts with democratic accountability implemented by governments and IOs, building in safeguards when they delegate policy development to expert communities. For example: (i) only specific policy issues or specialised decisions are delegated (as in the IPCC case); (ii) experts do not present one optimal policy but a set of feasible options for citizens or their representatives to choose among (such as the different engagement groups around the G20); and (iii) review processes are instituted to filter out normative biases or poor science. Others suggest it is epistemically sound to desire democracy because 'it encourages experts to ask socially useful questions that correspond to the many plural identities and interests among the public' (Lucky 2024: 456). In short, rather than a choice between either democracy or epistocracy, experts and other professional knowledge makers can be structured into a broader democratic framework.

Even so, the relationship between epistocracy with illiberal democracy or autocracy on the one hand, or in transnational governance where democratic institutions and values are less consolidated on the other, is yet to be fully fleshed out but provides a fertile field of analysis for future political science research. If epistocracy does expand in venues like multi-stakeholder initiatives or transnational administration, political scientists have a role to investigate if epistocratic dynamics hollow out nascent democratic features of TNG. Another avenue could be to investigate the role of 'experts' and social scientists from think tanks, consultancy firms, and universities in the growing dynamics of transnational repression. 'Global citizenship' and 'limited epistocracy' might be desirable in TNG, but autocratic futures are also a plausible outcome in global and regional policy processes.

Data availability statement. Data availability is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Financial support. Aside from the salaried position of the author, there was no other funder in the drafting of this paper.

Competing interests. There are no conflicts of interest or competing interests in the development of the article.

References

- Biermann, F. (2024). 'Earth system governance: a governance perspective on geoethics', in S. Peppoloni and G. D. Capua (Eds.) *Geoethics for the Future* (pp. 161–169). Elsevier.
- Brando, N., Boonen, C., Cogolati, S., Hagen, R., Vanstappen, N., and Wouters, J. (2019). 'Governing as commons or as global public goods: two tales of power'. *International Journal of the Commons*, 13(1), 553–577.
- Brans, M., and Timmermans, A. (2022). *The Advisory Roles of Political Scientists in Europe: Comparing Engagements in Policy Advisory Systems*. Springer Nature.
- Cooper, A.F., and English, J. (eds.) (2006). *International Commissions and the Power of Ideas*. Academic Foundation.
- Cornelius, N., and Wallace, J. (2023). 'John Gerard Ruggie and the UN guiding principles on business and human rights', in *Encyclopedia of Sustainable Management* (pp. 2148–2151). Springer International Publishing.
- Coutaz, R.R., and Paoli, S. (eds.) (2024). *Building Europe through Education, Building Education through Europe: Actors, Spaces and Pedagogies in a Historical Perspective*. Routledge.

- Della Porta, D.** (ed.) (2006). *Globalization from Below: Transnational Activists and Protest Networks* (Vol. 26). University of Minnesota Press.
- Djelic, M.L., and Quack, S.** (2010). 'Transnational communities and governance', in M.L. Djelic and S. Quack (Eds.), *Transnational Communities: Shaping Global Economic Governance* (pp. 3–36). Cambridge University Press.
- Dryzek, J.S.** (2006). *Deliberative Global Politics: Discourse and Democracy in a Divided World*. Polity.
- Fraser, N.** (2024). 'Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', in K. Nash and A. Scott (Eds.), *New Critical Writings in Political Sociology* (pp. 489–513). Routledge.
- Haang'andu, P., and Béland, D.** (2020). 'Transnational actors and the diffusion of social policies: an ideational approach', in C. Schmitt (Ed.), *From Colonialism to International Aid: External Actors and Social Protection in the Global South* (pp. 305–332). Springer International Publishing.
- Held, D.** (2009). 'Restructuring global governance: cosmopolitanism, democracy and the global order'. *Millennium*, 37(3), 535–547.
- Jeffrey, A.** (2018). 'Limited epistocracy and political inclusion'. *Episteme*, 15(4), 412–432.
- Larsen, A.B., Munk, A.K., Hansen, H.S., and Scavenius, T.** (2026). 'Mapping the epistemic geography of the intergovernmental panel on climate change (1995–2022)'. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 175, 104291.
- Lucky, M.C.** (2024). 'Knowledge-making in politics: expertise in democracy and epistocracy'. *Political Theory*, 52(3), 431–458.
- Moloney, K.** (2021). 'Deconcentrated global governance, transnational administration, and the public administration discipline', *Global Public Policy and Governance*, 1(2), 175–201.
- Nicolaidis, K.** (2024). 'The third democratic transformation: from European to planetary politics'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 62(3), 845–867.
- Pal, L.A.** (2023). 'Speaking good to power: repositioning global policy advice through normative framing', *Policy and Society*, 42(3), 347–358.
- Pouliot, V., and Thérien, J.P.** (2023). *Global Policymaking*. Cambridge University Press.
- Seabrooke, L., and Sending, O.J.** (2020). 'Contracting development: managerialism and consultants in intergovernmental organizations'. *Review of International Political Economy*, 27(4), 802–827.
- Stone, D.** (2019). *Making Global Policy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tedeschi, M., Vorobeva, E., and Jauhiainen, J.S.** (2022). 'Transnationalism: current debates and new perspectives'. *GeoJournal*, 87(2), 603–619.
- Veselinović, J.** (2024). *European Union foreign policy think tanks and the 'career' of strategic autonomy*. PhD dissertation Freie Universität Berlin.