The Dynamic Relations between Power Politics and Institutionalization: A Neo-Gramscian Intervention

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Contents

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What Do We Know and What Don't We?

There is, in fact, a whole lot we already know. We know that power differences between states matter for the design and content of international institutions: the powerful have more influence on them, and power dynamics characterize decision-making processes within formal institutions (see, e.g., Gruber 2000; Steinberg 2002; Stone 2004; Drezner 2008; Dreher, Sturm, and Vreeland 2009; Thompson 2010; Copelovitch 2010; Lim and Vreeland 2013; Allen and Yuen 2014). Thus, power is exercised through and can be augmented by institutionalization. We also know that, while it provides them with benefits, institutionalized cooperation simultaneously constrains states in their exercise of power and may even affect their relative power positions (see, e.g., Lake 1999; Ikenberry 2001; Voeten 2001; Thompson 2009; Kreps 2011; Weitsman 2014). Institutions can sometimes shift the outcomes of interaction between states away from what they would likely have been without them. Thus, institutionalization can counteract power politics.

As argued by the editors in the introduction to this volume, it makes no sense to juxtapose a world of self-help and power politics with one of institutionalization and cooperation. Not only is "institutionalized cooperation . . . often the result of the 'power politics of peace,' for example, balancing threat or power or exercising hegemony" (see also Wivel 2004), it is also evident that no matter how deeply institutionalized the politics, power struggles will never be absent from

them (see the chapters by Martin-Brûlé, Pingeot, and Pouliot and by Hall and Mérand, in this volume). The previously cited and many other studies have expanded our understanding of the complex dynamics linking power politics and international institutionalization, enough so to reject as evidently silly the juxtaposition of a cliché structural realist vision of institutions as epiphenomenal to power politics with a cliché liberal-constructivist vision of power politics' death by institutions (see the chapter by Sørensen). However, as a rule, relevant international relations (IR) scholarship remains wedded to a realist-inspired view of power as material, relational, and the prerogative of states. This is also illustrated by most (though not all) contributions to this volume. I will instead advocate a neo-Gramscian perspective and argue that we need to leave state centrism and strictly material and relational conceptions of power behind to shed more light on the central question posed by this volume: *What is the relationship between power politics and institutionalization? Can the latter constrain or even overcome the former?*

How would we know if it can? Institutionalization constraining power politics would emphatically *not* have to mean that states would no longer be key actors in world politics nor that it would no longer matter how powerful states are vis-à-vis their peers. However, it *would* have to mean that relative power would at least occasionally fail to predict the policy outcomes of international interaction. Explicitly or implicitly, all contributions to this volume admit that this may well happen or in fact does happen. Yet all fail to embed this recognition in a fully developed analytical framework, and most fail to take seriously the opening this constitutes for potential fundamental change to world affairs. The reason for the second lacuna is their commitment to various versions of IR realism. Realist-inspired contributions to the debate adopt a state-centric ontology and pre-dominantly material and relational conceptions of power.[1] These theoretical commitments, while delivering a range of valuable payoffs, also result in several blind spots when one explores the relationship between institutionalization and power. The remainder of this section will show how. The next section will then develop my own neo-Gramscian take and explain its added value. It will show how we can recognize that power politics remains a core feature of international relations even as international institutions are becoming ever more numerous and comprehensive, and yet simultaneously take a more open stance with respect to the possibility of political transformation.

Realist Contributions

Opening the conversation in this book, the chapters by Barkin and Weitsman and by Ripsman divert the discussion from the relationship between power politics and institutionalization to the Abbott and Snidal (1998) question: Why do states (including great powers) spend so much time, resources, and influence on international institutions? Obviously, this is puzzling from a structural realist

point of view suspecting such institutions of irrelevance. As pointed out by Ripsman, neoclassical realism moves us significantly beyond structural realist accounts by pointing out that while "states construct foreign policy to respond to international imperatives," "domestic political arrangements . . . have an intervening influence between systemic pressures and national foreign policy responses." This also helps explain why states, and even great powers, find benefits in setting up, joining, maintaining, and supporting international institutions. In his contribution Ripsman also shows that the perceived legitimacy associated with operating through international institutions and thereby bestowed on the policies of institutionally cooperating states matters both domestically and internationally with direct consequences for governmental power. This is an important observation to which I will return later. However, remaining wedded to realism, Ripsman does not see this as potentially enhancing the power of institutions in ways that could transform world politics away from a predominance of relative state power. It is not clear why not. From a range of alternative theoretical perspectives, one may legitimately ask whether (and when) the power payoffs of the legitimacy (and other benefits) granted by institutionalized cooperation may not lead to an "embedded realism"—or even an "embedded liberalism" (see the chapter by Rosamond)—in which state decision making is in fact so heavily constrained by institutional commitments that power has in good part gone elsewhere.

Barkin and Weitsman's "realist institutionalism" addresses the same question and comes closer to the position I will defend later. It is evidently true that institutions both bestow power and pose constraints on its operation (see also Barnett and Duvall 2005), and it is useful to know how they do so, as the authors begin to show. It is furthermore important to relax the focus on formal institutions, which characterizes most of this book, to understand that power also operates through and is constrained by *informal* institutions, unwritten rules, and norms. However, also in this contribution, a realist commitment to state centrism prevents us from fully grasping the dynamics of interaction between power politics and institutionalization as processes that transcend interstate relations. On the positive side, Barkin and Weitsman come closest to actually theorizing the relevance of the legitimacy benefits for state policy provided by institutions for both domestic and international audiences. This is made possible by taking on board constructivist thought on power as both material and ideational (e.g., Barnett and Duvall 2005; Mattern 2001; Krebs and Jackson 2007; Barkin 2010). This is not a bad idea, but I argue that there is a better one: a neo-Gramscian take on the power politics–institutionalization dynamic is more appropriate because it allows us to analyze the workings of material and ideational power *together* and to see how such complex power can become embedded in institutions in ways that can both enhance and undermine the operation of power politics.

Lobell and Nicholson's contribution in part 4 of this volume takes up one side of the power politics–institutionalization dynamic and addresses the question of

how institutions *limit* the pursuit of power. Their answer is that they operate as structural modifiers (see Snyder 1996), affecting states' interaction capacity, competition, socialization, and, hence, behavior. They make the important observations that structural modifiers may be ideational and that a hegemon might not be necessary to create and enforce the rules, both of which are crucial to understand the transformative potential of institutionalization. However, they remain wedded to both structuralism and a predominantly material conception of power when they argue that "successful practices [i.e., socialization] are determined by the structure of the system itself and not by individual leaders, their regime type, or leaders' beliefs and ideas." I will argue later that we should instead include ideas as immaterial sources of power *within* our conceptualization of structure, which simultaneously grants a greater role to agency and thus to potential for change than found in materialist structuralist accounts. This allows us to see more comprehensively why and how institutionalization both enables and constrains the operation of power and also how, as implied by Lobell and Nicholson, international socialization does not *necessarily* have to lead state behavior to diverge from realpolitik, as often uncritically assumed by liberal-constructivist approaches.

Wivel and Paul's contribution in part 3 takes up the opposite side of the power politics–institutionalization dynamic and addresses the question how institutions *enable* the pursuit of power. It specifically focuses on the ways in which they can support states' soft-balancing strategies. Once again, institutions are characterized as important sources of legitimacy for state policy, in addition to other benefits. This contribution also sheds important light on how institutionalization can actually counteract the logic of power politics, by arguing that "states use institutional soft balancing to counter violations of the rules of the game in international relations, in particular when these violations are committed by great powers." Also, that "states use institutional soft balancing in cases of threats and violations of the territorial integrity of friendly states and coalition partners" cannot but strengthen the consensus on which the relevant institutions are based, thus contributing to stabilizing institutionalization trends. In this manner, we can see how the use of institutions for soft balancing may not only reduce the amount of international aggression (thus having a pacifying effect) but also strengthen the trend of institutionalization itself. In response to the question of how institutionalization may enhance power politics, this contribution thus ends up arguing (at least in part) that power politics may enhance institutionalization. It grasps the dynamic relationship between the two without explicitly theorizing it and stops just short of recognizing the transformative potential entailed.

Carson and Thompson put the two sides of the power politics–institutionalization dynamic together by studying how institutions both constrain and enable the pursuit of power. They focus specifically on how this happens through international organizations' regulation of access to and usability of information.

Information as a source of power within organizations can serve to further entrench the advantages of already powerful states, "but it can also make it possible for relatively weak states to leverage information-power dynamics to 'punch above their weight-class.'" This not only (1) shows how institutionalization may counteract power politics but also (2) clearly recognizes the relevance of ideational sources of power, as in fact "the power effects of information appear to be decoupled from more traditional [i.e., material] sources of power." The authors also (3) relax the bias in favor of power as relational, by looking at how it can be diffused and embedded in institutional environments. All three observations are important for the argument I will make later. However, while Carson and Thompson rightly claim to occupy a theoretical middle ground by taking both state power and institutions seriously, I hold that we must more radically break with the realist departure point, leave state centrism more fully behind, and operate systematically with a broader definition of power as foreshadowed but not explicitly advocated in the contributions discussed so far. This will equip us to explore whether and how we can perceive institutionalization as affecting in significant ways, perhaps even transforming or altogether outgrowing, power politics.

Alternative Contributions

This volume also includes several contributions by nonrealist scholars. How do they take up the challenge of theorizing the relationship between power and institutions away from the realist ontology, and how does my contribution relate to theirs? The chapters by Martin-Brûlé, Pingeot, and Pouliot and by Hall and Mérand both illustrate how power politics operate within and around institutional contexts. While Martin-Brûlé, Pingeot, and Pouliot show this for UN peacekeeping operations, Hall and Mérand do so for European Union member-state relations and (crisis) governance. In both contexts institutional embedment "enables but also constrains the transfer of struggles for influence across national, regional, and international spheres" (Martin-Brûlé, Pingeot, and Pouliot). The presence, shape, and functioning of institutions affect such struggles, as they are, in turn, affected by them.

Stacie Goddard, in her analysis of revisionism in and through institutions, confirms that "institutions both enable and constrain power politics." She usefully breaks with much received wisdom by insisting that revisionism can be exercised from within institutions; that institutions do not necessarily "tame" the revisionists within them; that, on the contrary, institutional dynamics may also undermine participating status quo powers; and that, precisely by employing institutions, revision or power transition do not necessarily have to take violent forms. An important take-home message here is that revisionism, or in fact much more broadly, the seeds of intentional structural change, tends not to lie outside

a system with its institutions, but *within* it. This seems to be remaining true no matter how (or how deeply) politics are institutionalized. This means, on the one hand, that we have no reason to expect institutionalization to move us *beyond* power politics. On the other hand, it is no reason to jump to the conclusion that institutions are epiphenomenal. After all, important changes—also changes in power relations—are facilitated and steered by them. In this sense, institutional(ized) politics *are* power politics. From this insight arises an important dilemma, which I will discuss in the second part of this chapter.

Georg Sørensen reiterates the starting point of the volume that "strong liberalism's" transformative optimism is just as unrealistic as claims that institutions are irrelevant for international governance. He takes the position of a "skeptic and hopeful liberalism," observing, on the one hand, that in many areas governance is barely "good enough," piecemeal, or gridlocked but, on the other, that much governance is taking place because of and through institutions, which seem by and large resilient. Sørensen further agrees with Cox and Sinclair (1996) "that a stable and legitimate order is founded on a fit between a power base, . . . a common collective image of order expressed in values and norms, and an appropriate set of institutions." Yet he fails to go further with this important insight: in the obvious absence of such an order, we need to be concerned with the processes taking place on and between all three levels identified by Cox (the material, the ideational, and the institutional), as together they determine the nature of international order along with its perceived legitimacy and stability.

My later argument lays the foundations for such an investigation. In so doing it connects most closely with the chapter by Ben Rosamond, who also observes that most definitions of power politics, including the one suggested by the editors of this volume, carry strong realist connotations. Being concerned with "who gets what, when, and how" from a state-centric and materialist point of view leads them to treat states as "the powers," power as a resource, and power dynamics as relational. Basing himself on Susan Strange (1994a, 1998), Rosamond argues that, instead, we need to be able to see power as structural and structural power as drawing on "collective understandings and intersubjectivities." Placing what I see as excessive emphasis on the nonmaterial dimension of (power) structures, he argues: "The structures of world politics, rather than being material in essence or exogenous to action, are best seen as intersubjective, that is, rooted in collective understandings that in turn define the parameters of actor behavior in both technical and normative senses." Further, he rightfully observes that "actor behavior, premised [inter alia, I would add] on these broad intersubjectivities, both produces concrete material effects and (through practice) reproduces and reifies the intersubjective structure," making it "robust." Last, "intersubjective structures can be made 'real' [again, I add inter alia] through the design and maintenance of institutions that internalize their logic." Rosamond here makes important points, which I will link later in a broader, systematic argument.

Most contributions to this volume have worked with a realist-inspired view of power and a focus on formal and intergovernmental institutions at the expense of other forms. Both of these biases need to be left behind if we want to achieve the goals laid out by the editors: we want to understand better why and how institutions evolve, decay, or regenerate. We want to know more about how institutions can be tools of revisionism (see the chapter by Goddard) or power transition and in this way support peaceful change. It is no accident that this scholarly interest arises now: global systemic power transition is on the horizon, and as scholars belonging to the declining hegemony, we would rather the transition, if it must come, be peaceful. How could this work? The editors are on the right track when they suggest that this means that we need to "go beyond an intentional goal-oriented understanding of power" and also when they observe that "it makes little sense to decouple materialist measures of power from how policymakers understand power and [its] legitimate use" (see also Guzzini 1993). But we need to go further than that. In this volume we have found examples of midlevel theorizing leading to a "more eclectic, but also more open, understanding of international relations" than that characterizing the interparadigm debates on institutions and power politics. But what overall lessons can we draw? Here I take up the editors' challenge to reconnect the foregoing "to more general discussions and concerns on the nature of international relations and state behavior."

Reconceptualizing Power Politics and Institutionalization from a Neo-Gramscian Perspective

All the above contributions have made sensible claims regarding the coexistence of power politics and institutionalization in contemporary world politics. But they all suffer from blind spots following from their shared realist ontological commitments or do not go far enough in drawing theoretical conclusions from diverging ontologies or empirical observations. It is clear that realists' answer to the question of whether institutionalization may lead us away from power politics by reducing the impact of relative state power on collective policy outcomes *has to* be no. The remainder of this contribution will show that it is possible to accept the basic realist assumption that power politics remains a core feature of international relations while at the same time international institutions are becoming ever more numerous and comprehensive, and yet adopt a more open stance with respect to the possibility of political transformation and to theorize this stance. To this end I adopt a neo-Gramscian perspective that, aside from its openly normative stance in favor of overcoming the status quo, differs from the realist-inspired takes in this volume in five key analytical respects, which will be unpacked later:[2] (1) it adopts a broader definition of power that explicitly includes

nonmaterial power resources and can see power as diffuse and structurally embedded; (2) it enables us to understand the key role of legitimacy for embedding power in institutions, rendering it structural, and so stabilizing world orders; (3) it thereby also becomes less wedded to a state-centric ontology, allowing room for politics to operate through other types of actors and channels; (4) it uses the language of hegemony to comprehend the ways in which power structures, thus defined, become stabilized, including through international institutionalization; (5) it reveals the paradox of institutions becoming *empowering* by providing legitimacy precisely to the extent that they are perceived as *counteracting* power politics. I briefly explain each of these points and conclude on how this perspective helps us understand both continuity and change in contemporary world affairs.

The first key intervention made by a neo-Gramscian reconceptualization of the power politics–institutionalization dynamic is an abandonment of the stress on material at the expense of ideational power and a move to theorize the two together. Gramsci (1971) conceptualized power as combining material and ideational components and thereby as exercised as a mixture of force and consent. While rule by force alone is unsustainable, rule by consent alone is no rule. It is wherever force and consent are mixed that power can be enacted in ways that have lasting political effects. This means that alongside material capabilities, resources affecting the ability to let others see the world as one would like them to and to persuade them to share one's point of view are absolutely crucial components of power (see, e.g., Cox and Schechter 2003). This is not something previous contributions to this volume disagree with, as we will also see, but it is not something most foreground sufficiently.

Gramsci used the term "hegemony" to capture a dynamic political structure in which power is exercised as a mixture of force and consent. The concept merges the material and ideational components of power, makes them inseparable, and reveals their interdependence. In the words of Cox and Sinclair, it is

> a structure of values and understandings about the nature of order that permeates a whole system of states and non-state entities. . . . Such a structure of meanings is underpinned by a structure of power, in which most probably one state is dominant but that state's dominance is not sufficient to create hegemony. Hegemony derives from the dominant social strata of the dominant states in so far as these ways of doing and thinking have acquired the acquiescence of the dominant social strata of other states. (1996, 151)

Reconceptualizing power in this manner has five important implications. First, while the material bases of hegemony remain absolutely crucial (Strange 1988a; see also Grieco and Ikenberry 2003), the structures that represent the set of opportunities and constraints faced by political actors now include ideational alongside material components (Strange 1996). Knowledge, ideas, concepts, theories, language, traditions, conventions, norms, rules, and other immaterial components of social life become *part of* power structures. They are not merely structural modifiers, as suggested by Lobell and Nicholson in this volume.

Second, the moment we theorize ideational and material components of power together, we can no longer so easily tie power to particular actors. Following Gramsci (1971), hegemony is a form of power that connects states to civil societies and is embodied in manifold political, cultural, and social practices. Power is not owned by states but is socially embedded and diffused in society and its institutions (see Herman and Chomsky 1988). Power becomes less relationally defined, and more diffuse, not the property of specific actors as much as an attribute of social structures. This insight makes clinging to state centrism impossible (see also Scholl and Freyberg-Inan 2013), as we can see how power is enacted by a variety of types of actors, across levels of governance, in varying coalitions. This does not mean that it is impossible to locate, but it does mean that seeking the effects of power politics exclusively in relations between states overlooks a great deal of how power operates both to support and to undermine the translation of power differences between interacting political entities into political outcomes. This is far from trivial, as today state centrism does not equip us to see how power is increasingly concentrated in transnational networks and a transnational ruling class (Sklair 1997) and contested between transnationalized social groups defined on class, ideological, and other bases.[3] A neo-Gramscian conception of power as operating through hegemony is, in short, more useful for understanding the transnationalizing and multilevel governance world we live in.

Third, we can now see how institutions, both formal and informal, become key components in stabilizing power relations and constructing and maintaining hegemony. In the Marxist tradition, Gramsci (1971) theorized how in advanced capitalist societies the bourgeoisie used all manner of institutions to persuade subordinated classes to internalize its values and goals and to conceive of them as general interest. Dominant groups in this way present their rule as legitimate and are enabled to rule largely through consent. This is precisely how international institutions operate today to support the rule of internationally dominant actors. From good governance norms via the Washington Consensus through World Trade Organization rulings, from military alliance commitments via Security Council resolutions to responsibility to protect (R2P), international institutions serve to present and enforce the interests of powerful actors as an international common sense, which becomes increasingly difficult to contest as such institutionalization progresses. As Barkin and Weitsman write, the responsibilities and rules of international organizations "support and reinforce particular worldviews, thereby supporting those countries that share those worldviews. . . . It is generally the case that the most efficient way to get others to do what one wants them to do is to convince them that it is what they want to do, or that it is the right thing to do. And institutions can be an effective way of creating the legitimacy and knowledge that can do this convincingly" (see also Goddard

2009b). This is rule by consent supported by institutionalization and the way institutionalization *supports* power politics.

Fourth, we have by now been repeatedly confronted with the key role of legitimacy. Perceived legitimacy is an absolutely crucial ideational power resource (see, e.g., Finnemore and Toope 2001). This has also become clear in previous contributions to this volume. For example, Wivel and Paul have shown how perceived legitimacy is crucial for the success of institutional soft-balancing strategies. Carson and Thompson have shown how it matters for harvesting the benefits of informational asymmetries: "To the extent that information advantages render arguments more credible and legitimate, they could lend states increased authority to set negotiating agendas and could be used for more effective strategizing and persuasion in the conduct of bargaining." A neo-Gramscian perspective, however, brings added value by helping us understand *why and how* legitimacy is so important for linking the processes of power politics and institutionalization: perceived legitimacy is a prerequisite for consent, and institutions provide cheap compliance with the power relations they embody to the extent that they are perceived as legitimate.

This, fifth, reveals an important paradox. As Abbott and Snidal (1998) also argue, a major source of legitimacy for international institutions is precisely that they are seen to counteract power politics. On the one hand, international institutions do allow states (and other actors) to act out interests and reflect power relations. On the other hand, their usefulness depends on their being perceived as not reflecting power relations to the full extent (and thus as not merely reproducing the interests of the powerful). To the extent that they are seen as mere transmission belts for the parochial interests of most powerful actors, they will lose legitimacy in the eyes of all observers that do not align with those interests, and they will be substantially weakened, if not abandoned, as a result.[4] Thus, from the perspective of states (and other actors), to be able to harness the benefits of institutionalization, it is important to ensure that institutions are perceived as transcending power politics. And only to the extent that they are *seen* to transcend power politics may they actually end up doing so. This, then, is the paradoxical way institutionalization can *counteract* power politics. It also creates a challenge for reflexive scholarship: showing how institutionalization fits the logic of power politics undermines the potential for institutionalization to move us out of a realist world.

Conclusion

By adopting a neo-Gramscian perspective, I have been able to pull together a series of important observations made in the previous contributions, which stopped short of theorizing them systematically, owing to their commitment to realist ontological premises or the lack of a systematic alternative framework. Power is both material and ideational. It is relational but also diffuse. It cannot

be straightforwardly tied to states but is shared by other types of actors and embedded in social structures, which in this day and age are to a significant extent transnationalized. Institutions are the means by which power is structurally embedded. For this process to be successful, their perceived legitimacy is crucial. This, finally, means that institutions are empowered to the extent that they are seen as transcending power politics. This institutional power can be used either to entrench or to outgrow the power structures that supported the institution in the first place. But to the extent that it is seen to do the former, the institution is weakened, and its power political benefits evaporate.

Such an approach can, last, help us comprehend both continuity and change in the interplay between power politics and institutionalization. By becoming structurally embedded through institutionalization, power relations become stabilized and continue to have effects also after relative state power has shifted. As Barkin and Weitsman write, "Institutional histories are path dependent." Moving beyond state centrism and expanding our concept of power allows us to see that hegemony can continue after the hegemon is gone. This is what we are witnessing today, in an age in which the US-led global northwest has lost its post–Cold War unipolar status, but its rule over global governance still continues to be hegemonic. But importantly, the neo-Gramscian vision of power structures is not deterministic but dynamic. Institutionalization can stabilize such structures, but it can also undermine them. It can do so gradually by creating an "embedded realism," in which states transfer power to institutions for reasons of rational self-interest, but thereby lock themselves into a trajectory of change away from a realist world. It may do so also in more radical ways through contestation over the forms institutionalization should take. Herein may lie hope for peaceful systemic change. This can be studied through the neo-Gramscian concept of counterhegemony, which helps us think through how current orders can be challenged from within, drawing on the same sorts of resources that support the status quo in order to challenge its common sense (Rajagopal 2003, 2006; Sanbonmatsu 2004; Juris 2008; Opel and Pompper 2003; Starr 2000). In short, a neo-Gramscian approach can show why the juxtaposition of power politics with institutionalization is a false one, as the two processes are in fact tightly intertwined. By understanding that and how this is the case, we understand how they go hand in hand but also become better able to see how each process might become destabilized and thus detect possible sources of fundamental change in world affairs.

Notes

1. The contribution by Lobell and Nicholson in addition entails a commitment to structuralism. The other versions of realism we encounter in this book allow more room for agency. My critique extends to them all.

2. Explicitly neo-Gramscian accounts appear much more frequently in international political economy (IPE; e.g., Cox 1986; Cox and Sinclair 1996; Cox and Schechter 2003; Gill

1993, 2000; Rupert 1995; Eschle and Maiguashca 2005; Stephen 2009, 2011) than in the literature on international security. But in the debate surrounding institutionalization and power politics, a neo-Gramscian intervention seems called for, as critical IPE has done considerably more work on understanding the structural workings of power than security studies. See also the chapter by Rosamond.

3. The importance of the transnational dimension of institutionalization is also recognized in the chapters by Sørensen and Rosamond. Goddard as well recognizes the relevance of institutionalized networks, even as she unfortunately focuses her chapter narrowly on networks among states.

4. This dynamic is all too familiar, for example, to observers of European Union politics: efforts to develop common EU policy are routinely hindered by weaker member states' perceptions of disproportionate influence of some of the more powerful. When such perceptions are less prominent, all, including the strong, members stand a greater chance of actually being able to act on their interests.